Early Computer Game Genre Preferences (1980-1984)

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ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the lack of solid historical information concerning early computer game sales and preferences. Two consistent data series from the magazines *Softalk* and *Computer Gaming World* (*CGW*) are analyzed to give an overview of the best selling and best rated games by players for the period of 1980-1984. A "genre palette" is inferred from the sources, giving a snapshot of how contemporaries framed and interpreted the offer in computer games. A comparison of the series reveals the *CGW* readership constitutes a distinct "hardcore" play community amongst general computer game players. It is also observed that genre preferences vary in time: arcade games peak in 1982 and then recede in favor of computer-native genres. A brief comparison with Atari 2600 best sellers reveal the inadequacy of the computer game genre palette to describe home console games. The historical and constructed nature of genres as "horizons of expectations" is discussed.

Keywords
Computer, Games, History, Genre, Apple II, Arcade, Strategy, Adventure, Role-Playing

INTRODUCTION
Digital game history is progressively establishing itself as a serious subset of game studies. Despite some progress, this work is still hampered by the lack of foundational data. The simple question of what games people bought, played and preferred finds no easy answer. Yet, having a sense of players' "horizon of expectations", in the words of literary historian (amongst other things) Hans Robert Jauss, is tantamount to understanding a work's reception: "The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced" (1970, p. 10). It's arguably impossible to fully understand the historical evolution of games without a sense of the players and designers' initial ludic cultures and how successive games either fulfilled or challenged their expectations, setting the table for new generations of works.

For example, *Dune II* (Westwood 1992) is widely described as the first real-time strategy games. However that concept was unknown to its makers and players. Simon Dor observes that the term is "[…] nowhere to be found in its paratext […]" and that in "[…] 32 reviews of *Dune II* written between 1992 and 1994, there is not a single mention of the expression that defines the genre" (2014, p. 64). It is in fact described as a "simulation strategy game", terms reflecting the contemporary genre palette. Interestingly, Dor

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reports that many reviewers interpret it as a crossover between a wargame and *SimCity* (Maxis 1989).

Beyond reception and aesthetic issues, historical information on game preferences would also be very useful to better understand the establishment and evolution of the different play communities often subsumed under the large "video game" umbrella. Genre preference is more structuring to game players than to readers or film viewers as crossing game genre lines requires not only an interpretative adaptation but a performative one as well: "The certainty of being able to transfer one's hard-earned competences to an upcoming title is a very strong incentive for genre fidelity" (Lessard 2013).

The historian has access to multiple primary sources to assess historical game preferences: advertisement, reviews, testimonials; but it is hard to paint a global picture beyond the anecdotal evidence. Although one will never know for sure what games North Americans were playing exactly, in what proportion, and what they preferred, some indicators would certainly help. Sales data, for example, is strong evidence of what games are attractive to an audience at a given moment, whether as a result of marketing, media coverage or word-of-mouth. The main problem is that this information is extremely sensitive for publishers and very hard to come by. Magazines will publish once in a while a helpful "Top-10" chart but they are punctual and difficult to compare**,** as their source and methodology vary enormously.

Sales data does not equate to player preference. A player can buy new attractive games and be consistently disappointed, preferring that other game she's been playing for months. Expert reviews and player testimonials help us find out the preferred games but they are also anecdotal and their representativeness is difficult to assess.

The main vocation of this paper is to compile and analyze two consistent historical series informing us on early computer game sales and ratings: *Softalk* magazines' "The Top Thirty" (1980-1984) and *Computer Gaming World*'s "Reader Input Device" (1982-1984). After presenting those two sources, we will discuss our generic approach to game preference and establish a "genre palette" for early computer games. Methodological choices will then be detailed before presenting results concerning genre distribution in game sales and ratings.

SOURCES

Softalk's "The Top Thirty"

Softalk was a computing magazine originally distributed freely to all Apple II owners and reaching in 1984 a peak of roughly 150,000 distributed units (*Folio 400* 1984). It covered all aspects of personal computing, from programming tricks to computer games, or home productivity. During the entire time of its publication, from September 1980 to August 1984, it maintained a monthly best-sellers list: "The Top Thirty". This list is of exceptional historical interest in many regards. For one thing, it is regular and consistent, its presentation and organization being the same throughout the period. It thus facilitates tracking changes over time thanks to comparable datasets. More surprising however is its rigorous methodology.

Many "top 10" lists of the time depend on reports from large distributors such as Softsel's *Hotlist*. Although a good indicator[1], these reports only concern the software shipped by that specific company to resellers (Bane 1988). It doesn't cover software distributed by

other companies and can't specify whether that software was actually sold to consumers. The *Softalk* "Top Thirty" is the result of repeated polls to a wide sample of Apple resellers representing between 8-15% (depending on the issue) of the overall market. According to the accompanying notes, the probability of statistical error ranges roughly from 2-5%.

Instead of simply ranking the top 30 best sellers, *Softalk* provides an index number revealing the gap between two titles. For example, in July 1984, *Flight Simulator II* (Sublogic 1983) is the best selling game with *Lode Runner* (Broderbund 1983) and *Wizardy* (Sir-Tech 1981) as runners-up. The indexes show how uneven this podium is with respective values of 98.27, 23.29 and 23.26. In fact, *Flight Simulator II* sold more than four times better than *Lode Runner* and *Wizardy,* which are pretty much *ex-aequo*.

The main downside of this series is its platform specificity. The Apple II is an important gaming computer in North America in the early 1980s[2] but the market is shared with Commodore, TRS-80 and Atari machines, and only part of the software catalogue is multi-platform. This series will inform us of what games Apple II owners are buying. Whether that information is also representative of owners of competing systems will have to be inferred from comparative information.

Computer Gaming World's "Reader Input Device"

Computer Gaming World (*CGW*) is an American magazine dedicated to (unsurprisingly) computer games. It was launched in 1981 and ran until 2006. Its self-estimated readership was of 25 000 in 1984 (Lombardy 1984). It featured the usual mix of reviews, previews, editorials, industry news but also columns from contemporary game designers such as Dan Bunten or Chris Crawford.

In the March/April issue of 1982, *CGW* initiated its "Reader Input Device" (RID), a poll asking readers to rate a list of games according to five criteria: graphics, design, documentation, "life", and price. The magazine began publishing this poll's results in the July/August issue once the editors felt they had enough responses for the poll to be "statistically significant". From then to September 1999, *CGW* provides us with an uninterrupted consistent series of player ratings of games from 1-10 (with decimals). The main interest of this series is providing a very long sample of comparable information concerning games players have actually played and rated according to preference. It also covers computer games across all contemporary platforms and provides some insight on their distribution (see Figure 1).

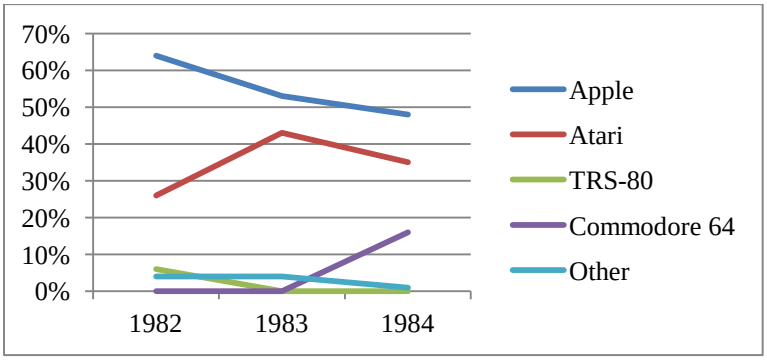

Figure 1: Platform distribution of respondents to *CGW*'s "Reader Input Device" from 1982-1984.

However valuable this series is, it is far from a scientific survey and a few things should be kept in mind at the moment of analysis. Its first bias is that players rate games on a list provided by the magazine. This list reflects the games "treated in some fashion" in earlier issues; the rationale being the establishment of some sort of dialogue between the magazine's staff and their readers on a set of common objects. This implies that games escaping the editorial board's attention (unknowingly or voluntarily) will not be represented. On the other hand, the list is usually quite long (starting at 36) and new titles are introduced with every issue. It is also the magazine's purpose to cover those games that are important to its readers.

Another important problem is that the poll is voluntary and thus speaks only for a subset of particularly motivated readers. The number of responses range from 121 in July 1982 to 289 in July 1984. These samples are substantial but it should be remembered that each player can only rate the games on the list she's actually played.

GENRE CLASSIFICATION

The Problem of Genre

Our goal being to get a sense of the *kinds* of games early computer game players preferred, we need a way to classify the 140+ titles referred to in our sources. Game "genre" is the usual form of classification used widely by players, journalists and publishers alike. As has often been noted (see Apperley 2006, Arsenault 2009 or Lessard 2013), genre categories are problematic and resist rigorous systemization. In this paper, I will go along with this conclusion from Arsenault's doctoral dissertation on video game genre: "facing the irreducible resistance of genre to theorization, one must turn to its documented historical uses […] The concept's specificity and operability can be maintained by considering it as a discursive rather than structural phenomenon, the punctual crystallization of a common cultural consensus" (2011, p.23, my translation). In other words, genres exist and are useful categories inasmuch as historical discursive communities use them to refer to a roughly consensual body of games.

Early Computer Game Genre Palette

In line with our understanding of genres as historically constructed categories, we have attempted to establish a "genre palette" that would have made sense to North-American computer game players of the early 1980s. We are lucky to find in *Softalk* an explicit genre categorization. In October 1981, the magazine decides to provide readers with an "[…] expanded breakout of various categories to show Apple owners with special interest what is hot in their areas" (p. 145). While keeping the general "Top Thirty" including all software from operating systems, compilers, databases, games *etc.*, "top 10s" (or 5s, depending) are also given for "home", "business", "hobby" (utilities), "word processors", but also: "strategy", "adventure", "fantasy" and, more than a year later, "arcade". It is worth citing here *Softalk's* description of these categories:

> *Arcade Games* are defined as games where hand-eye coordination and dextrous manipulation of the Apple keyboard or game controllers are the keys to success. […]
> *Strategy games* are defined as adversary games—person against person or person against computer—where a successful result would more likely occur from mental prowess than physical dexterity.
> *Adventure games* are considered those in which success requires solving several riddles or puzzles as your work your way through the program.

> *Fantasy games* are those in which you create one or more characters with whom you identify as the game progresses (Oct. 1981, p. 148).

It's interesting to note that these categories are quite "gameplay-centric", as they distinguish games according to the kinds of challenges they afford rather than their theme, for example. We should clarify for the modern reader that "adventure games" refer here to what would sometimes be called "interactive fiction" later as well as "graphic adventures". As for "fantasy games", they are equivalent to "computer role-playing games" (CRPG). It should also be noted that the editors are conscious of the constructed nature of those categories: "[…] the divisions were made arbitrarily and are susceptible to knowledgeable second-guessing by one and all" (p. 147). However, it is safe to assume that in spite of possible arguments, these categories made sense enough to contemporary readers to be kept throughout the series.

Computer Gaming World offers us a point of comparison to this classification. The July 1982 RID poll contains a question about the "category of personal computer game that most interests you" amongst "Arcade", "Wargame" and "Adventure" (p. 40). "Wargame" here can be roughly equated with *Softalk*'s "Strategy". As for "Adventure", it condenses both *Softalk*'s "Adventure" and "Fantasy" categories. This is not to say that these are the only three categories known to *CGW* as individual game reviews use much finer categories such as "graphic adventure" or "action/adventure" but this gives us a sense of how large numbers of games are abstracted. In June 1989, the RID would get a more refined genre breakdown reflecting earlier latent categorization: "Strategy", "Simulation", "Adventure", "Role-Playing Adventure", "Wargames", and "Action/Arcade" (p. 28). The main difference with the *Softalk* palette here is the subdivision of "Strategy" in "Strategy" *per se*, "Wargame", and "Simulation".

Methodology

Weighting

Each game in *Softalk*'s "The Top Thirty" was entered in a database with its index value as well as a series of relevant information (magazine issue, publisher, developer, date of publication, *etc*.). Titles reappearing multiple times in the list where re-entered with their new index. The index was used to weight the relative score of a game over a period of time by adding all its indexes. *CGW*'s RID was submitted to the same treatment using its "composite score" in lieu of index. Only the first 30 titles of each issue were considered to replicate *Softalk*'s model. In other words, the following *Softalk* data represents the number of times a title appeared in the Top-30 best *sellers* factored by its relative sales index (how much more that title sold compared to the next best sellers). The *CGW* data represents the number of times a title appeared in the Top-30 best rated factored by its relative score.

Genre Tagging

All titles of both series were tagged according to *Softalk*'s genre palette defined earlier in order to afford comparisons. If the title was at some point explicitly classified in one of the game categories, it was automatically tagged with that genre. Entries that were not, as those before the classification system or those appearing only in *CGW*'s RID, were manually tagged according to *Softalk*'s genre definition cited earlier and on the basis of available documentation in the form of game emulation, recorded play sessions or descriptions.

Most genre tagging was quite straightforward and arguable cases should not amount to much in the overall results. There is however an important borderline case, the *Flight Simulator* series (Sublogic 1979, 1983). It is explicitly tagged as "Strategy" in the magazine; however it does not entirely respect that category's "spirit" so to say. As a complex, realistic simulation, *Flight Simulator* probably emphasizes "mental prowess" over "physical dexterity" but it is also a real-time game requiring time-dependant manipulations. The ambiguity is worth mentioning as this hugely successful game accounts for more than half of all "Strategy" game sales indexed in *Softalk*.

RESULTS

Overall Genre Sales and Ratings

The following charts give an overview of relative genre importance for each analyzed series.

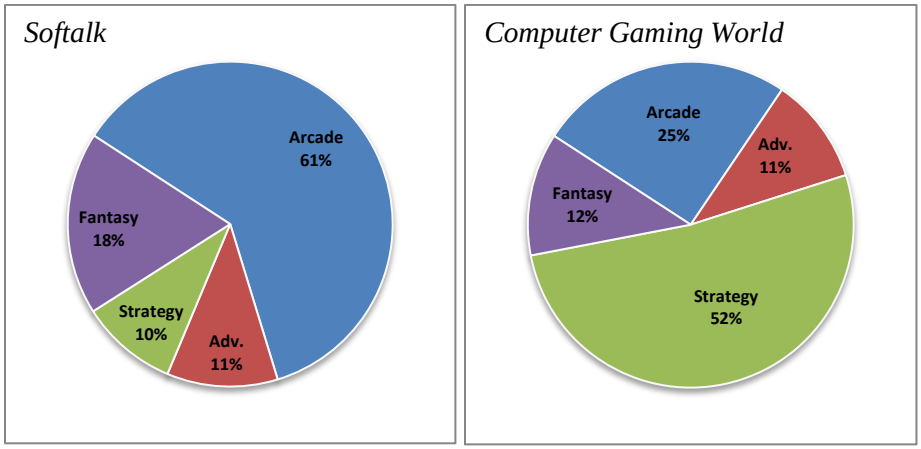

Figure 3: Weighted Genre Distribution in *Softalk*'s "The Top Thirty" (left) and *CGW*'s "Reader Input Device" (right) from 1980-1984.

The first striking feature of those two charts is the almost mirrored relative importance of the "arcade" and "strategy" genres. Arcade games are obviously very popular amongst general Apple II owner while strategy games appear as marginal, especially considering that *Flight Simulator I* and *II*—borderline strategy games at most—account for almost 5% of the already small 9% slice. On the other hand, strategy games form the highly dominant genre in *CGW*'s RID charts. It's a remarkable difference considering more than half of the RID respondents are also Apple II owners.

This really shows how distinct the readership of *Computer Gaming World* is as a play community from the overall computer game playing population. This is not only supported by their digital game ratings, but also their non-digital playing habits. In another poll, we learn that 32% of respondents had played *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D)* or a similar role-playing game, 48% had played war (board) games and 17% had even played miniature wargames (01/84, p. 5). These numbers are very significantly above national average. According to *Inc.* magazine, there were around 3 million *D&D* players worldwide in 1982 (Alsop 1982). If these were all to be found in the US only, they would still amount to hardly more than 1% of the general population.

CGW players would today be considered a "hardcore" audience, although their own term would be "dedicated hobbyists" or, mockingly, "grognards" (an expression inherited from wargaming). Their profile is however very different from the hardcore gaming audience identified around 2000 when the opposite term "casual" was being introduced. Those dedicated hobbyists are not the presumed teenager boys hooked on multi-player first-person shooters. According to another *CGW* poll, the reader's average age is 32 (05/1984, p. 46), and the RID series informs us that 75% of their top-30 games are slow-paced strategy, role-playing or adventure games.

The other interesting feature of these charts is the relative agreement over adventure games (a consistent 11%) and fantasy games (between 12% and 18%). The low adventure game representation is surprising considering the press coverage of Infocom's "interactive fiction", including such celebrated titles as the *Zork* (1980) series, *Deadline* (1982) or *Suspended* (1982). Apparently, in spite of adventure games being talked about, action games on one side and strategy games on the other retain strong preference.

Most popular games

Beyond general genre preference, it would be interesting to know whether there is some agreement on the overall favorite titles. These next charts highlight the weighted top-30 games for each series.

Softalk				***Computer Gaming World***			
#	**Game**	**Index**	**Genre**	**#**	**Game**	**Rating**	**Genre**
1	*Choplifter I*	1881,29	F	**1**	*Wizardry*	102,17	F
2	*Wizardry*	1744,36	Ar	**2**	*Wizardry II*	95,35	F
3	*Snack Attack*	881,3	Ar	**3**	*Guadalcanal Campaign*	93,97	S
4	*Castle Wolfenstein*	749,84	Ar	**4**	*Choplifter!*	92,4	Ar
5	*Flight Simulator*	717,81	S	**5**	*Southern Command*	91,54	S
6	*Lode Runner*	705,57	Ar	**6**	*Olympic Decathlon*	91,46	Ar
7	*Miner 2049er*	690,48	Ar	**7**	*Galactic Gladiators*	84,08	S
8	*Raster Blaster*	660,12	Ar	**8**	*Shattered Alliance*	83,45	S
9	*Wizardry II*	623,39	F	**9**	*Pinball Construction*	71,31	Ar
10	*Zaxxon*	581,46	Ar	**10**	*Computer Baseball*	70,9	S
11	*Wizard and the Princess*	548,5	Ad	**11**	*Zork Series*	64.36	Ad
12	*Alien Rain*	547,29	Ar	**12**	*The Cosmic Balance*	63,43	S
13	*Gorgon*	529,87	Ar	**13**	*Starcross*	62,26	Ad
14	*Apple Panic*	483,66	Ar	**14**	*Archon*	59,46	S
15	*Flight Simulator II*	482,06	S	**15**	*Eastern Front*	56,45	S
16	*Frogger*	437.57	Ar	**16**	*Star Blazer*	55.84	Ar
17	*Star Blazer*	407.77	Ar	**17**	*Combat Leader*	50.02	S
18	*Space Eggs*	384.57	Ar	**18**	*Blue Max*	49.27	Ar
19	*Wizardry III*	384.12	F	**19**	*North Atlantic 1986*	49	S
20	*Olympic Decathlon*	321.69	Ar	**20**	*Operation Whirlwind*	48.94	S
21	*Snoggle*	319.23	Ar	**21**	*Legionnaire*	48.31	S
22	*Ultima III*	319.18	F	**22**	*Ultima III*	46.13	F
23	*Ultima II*	299.58	F	**23**	*Lode Runner*	42.62	Ar
24	*Sneakers*	260.1	Ar	**24**	*Carrier Force*	42.59	S
25	*The Arcade Machine*	244.12	Ar	**25**	*Castle Wolfenstein*	41.66	Ar
26	*Zork*	244.11	Ad	**26**	*M.U.L.E.*	38.56	S
27	*Cannonball Blitz*	243.59	Ar	**27**	*Ultima I*	36.93	F
28	*Pool 1.5*	224.79	Ar	**28**	*Bomb Alley*	36.9	S
29	*Early Games for Children*	215.26	H	**29**	*Geopolitique*	34.76	S
30	*Ultima*	213.65	F	**30**	*Deadline*	34.61	Ad

Table 1: Top 30 games according to cumulative "index" (*Softalk*) and composite ratings (*CGW*) from 1980-1984

These tables highlight two obvious "winners" in the period. *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech 1981) and *Choplifter!* (Broderbund 1982) are not only the preferred titles of their genres, but they also surpass significantly all other games especially in sales but also in ratings. There is also an overall agreement between the two series concerning "fantasy" games with the *Wizardry* and *Ultima* (Sierra 1982) series dominating in both lists. It should be mentioned that "fantasy" titles are much less common in that period than other kinds of games, which might explain the significant overlap.

There are obviously many more arcade games in the *Softalk* list, but there are still three overlapping titles other than *Choplifter!*: *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse 1981), *Lode Runner* (Broderbund 1983) and *Star Blazer* (Broderbund 1982). It's interesting to note that with the exception of *Star Blazer*, these titles are not actual arcade clones but original computer games. This might in part explain *CGW*'s interest.

There are only two adventure games in *Softalk's* cumulative Top-30: *Wizard and the Princess* (Sierra 1980) and the first *Zork* (Infocom 1980). The latter comes first of adventure games in *CGW* but its high rank is also due to the fact that the *Zork* series is taken as a whole and not separated in different titles. The other *CGW* preferred adventure games are all Infocom "interactive fiction" titles. There is an interesting divide here concerning graphic adventures such as *Wizard and the Princess*. Looking further down the list, six out of the ten best selling adventure games in *Softalk* are graphic adventures for only two in *CGW*. Furthermore, Sierra's "Hi-Res Adventures" represent the majority of the *Softalk* graphic adventures but never appear in *CGW*'s list. Why *CGW* would snub such popular games is open to inquiry.

The "strategy" category is by far the most problematic in this comparison. The only strategy titles in *Softalk*'s cumulative Top-30 are *Flight Simulator I* and *II* (Sublogic 1979, 1983) while the *CGW* list is full of SSI titles with the obscure *Guadalcanal Campaign* (SSI 1982) actually occupying the top second position. There seemed to be a love affair between the play community embodied by *CGW* and SSI. On the other hand, those same games are almost absent from *Softalk*'s general best selling lists. This further supports the observation that the *CGW* readership represents a distinct play culture amongst computer game players.

Figure 4: *Guadalcanal Campaign* (SSI, 1982)

Genre preference evolution

Although our sample only ranges over four years, it is worth checking whether there are significant changes in genre preference over time.

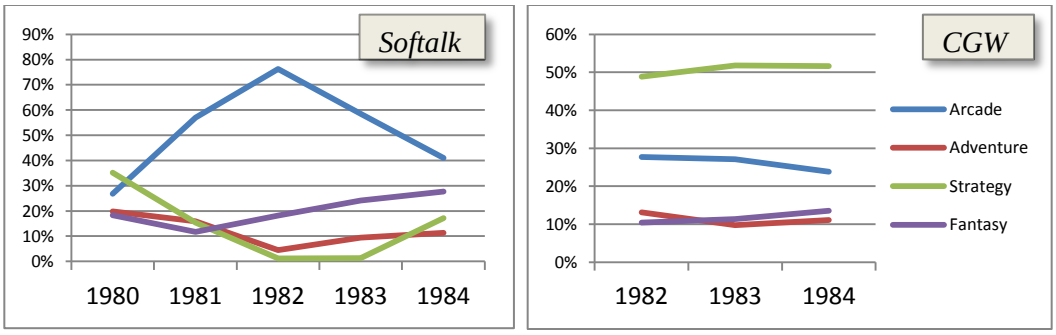

Figure 5: Yearly Weighted Genre Distribution in *Softalk*'s "The Top Thirty" (left) and *CGW*'s "Reader Input Device" (right) from 1980-1984.

The greater variance displayed by the *Softalk* sample displays can be explained by the fact that it represents sales rather than ratings. Even the most popular game's sales will eventually saturate. Its *CGW* ratings, however, can remain stable for as long as newer, better games haven't replaced it in the heart of its players.

The main feature of Figure 5 is the significant arcade peak of 1982. That year appears as a great vintage for arcade games with the release of many of the period's most popular titles: *Choplifter!* (Broderbund), *Snack Attack* (Datamost), *Miner 2049er* (Big Five), *Zaxxon* (Datasoft), and *Star Blazer* (Broderbund). The following decline might be explained by a change in platform positioning. In his 1983 Winter Consumer Electronics Show report, *CGW* writer Russell Sipe observes a specialization of domestic computers between "home computers" and "personal computers", the former emphasizing "entertainment and other home-related functions such as educational programs" and the other being destined for professional use (p. 10). Home computers include the Atari 400/800, Commodore Vic-20, and TI99/4A and the typical personal computer is the IBM PC.

The Apple II is now towards the end of its cycle: "While the Apple has been used by many as an entertainment device, its' main function is perceived to be as a business or professional machine" (Sipe 1983). David Blumstein of Softsel, a large software distribution company, is reported to say that: "The Apple games will become more and more strategic and cerebral oriented while the home computers will maintain the arcade orientation presently so popular. Arcade games will not disappear on the Apple but strategy and adventure games will dominate personal computer game software in the future". Indeed, both series show a decline in arcade games after 1982 accompanied by an increase of strategy, fantasy and strategy games. Role-playing games have already begun blooming with the *Wizardry* and *Ultima* series. Adventure games' moment will be a few years down the line with Sierra's "AGI"[3] games such as *King's Quest*, *Leisure Suit Larry* or *Space Quest*.

The variations observed in the previous figures support the notion that while play communities might have general genre preferences, those are still subject to fashion effects and shifts in the marketplace. Apple II owners of 1984 might still have been very interested in arcade games; however publishers were then prioritizing other platforms.

Comparing with the Atari 2600

At this point it would be interesting to get at least a sense of what these numbers would look like outside our specific scope. The main two alternative platforms for playing video games during our period are actual arcades and early home video consoles. According to a *Wikipedia* compilation, these would be the top 14 best selling Atari 2600 games:

Game	Sales (million copies)	Genre
Pac-Man	7	Ar
Pitfall!	4	Ar
Asteroids	3,8	Ar
Missile Command	2,5	Ar
Space Invaders	2	Ar
Demon Attack	2	Ar
E.T. The Extra Terrestrial	1,5	Ar
Adventure	1	Ar
Atlantis	1	Ar
Cosmic Ark	1	Ar
Kaboom!	1	Ar
Megamania	1	Ar

Table 2: Top-14 best selling Atari 2600 games (1978-1982)

Most genre attributions here are not problematic except perhaps for *Adventure* (Atari 1979) and *E.T.* (Atari 1982) which are usually classified as adventure games. It is not entirely clear what contemporary computer game players (from which we are pulling our genre palette) would consider these games. It is true that they require the solving of some sorts of puzzles and, despite their real-time regime, tend to emphasize "mental prowess" over "hand-eye coordination and dextrous manipulation" (referring to *Softalk*'s genre definitions). On the other hand, *Softalk* classified *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse 1981)—another borderline action/adventure case—as arcade. Whether one tags those two titles as adventure or not, it remains that "arcade" games would represent more than 90% of the Atari 2600 sales.

Genre preference is not the only factor here and platform specificity plays an important role. The Atari 2600 cannot save game states, which is essential to genres whose traversals require more than 30 minutes—that is to say all computer game genres other than arcade. Those genres also make extensive use of the keyboard—a peripheral unknown to the Atari 2600—in their current interface design state. Finally, they also rely heavily on textual communication when the home console doesn't have any dedicated resources for displaying text.

The point here is not that the home console genre palette was necessarily more limited than that of computer games, but that it might certainly *seem so* to contemporary computer game playing communities. In fact, one might see much more variety in this game list with the lens of a different genre palette that would include such categories as "maze", "platforming", "shooter" or "action/adventure". This exercise shows how genre palettes are only relevant within specific play communities and how they act as a prism in the reception of games. The genre palette constitutes a horizon of expectations of sorts, a framework informing the interpretation of the current offer of video games.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Softalk's* "The Top Thirty" and *CGW*'s "Reader Input Device" informs us on early computer game players' genre preferences. The two samples show there can be significant differences amongst players of a same platform family. *CGW* represents a play community with a strong focus on strategy games (an otherwise marginal genre) while sharing the general enthusiasm towards the other categories' most popular games such as *Choplifter!* or the *Wizardry* and *Zork* series.

The *Softalk* series shows that genre preferences can undergo important variations in time. While arcade games remain very popular throughout the period, they peak around 1982 at 70% and fall to 40% two years later. This can be partly platform-specific, as the Apple II is progressively abandoned as an entertainment platform in favor of a new generation of home computers. However, since this trend is also visible in the *CGW* series (although much more subtly), we can also hypothesize a growing general interest for the computer-native genres of "adventure", "fantasy" (role-playing games) and "strategy".

A comparison with contemporary best selling games on the Atari 2600, a home video console, highlights how genre palettes are specific to certain communities of discourse. Unless we accept that Atari games have only one genre, "arcade", which of course makes genre classification irrelevant, we would need to extract a genre palette endogenous to that play community. Even within a larger community such as computer game players, smaller groups may entertain "local" genre palettes derived from the general matrix, recognizing certain sub-genres and ignoring others. For example, *CGW's* chart in Figure 3 would be more representative if "strategy" was broken down along the lines of "wargame", "simulation" and "strategy" proper—three genres recognized by this community.

Genre palettes and preferences are useful tools to gain a better understanding of play communities. However, one should always keep in mind that genres are highly historical and specific to the communities of discourse that construct and use them. In the early 1980s, there was much less overlap in the genre palettes of computer game players and home video console players than there is today. To speak of a general "video game" culture at that time seems very problematic.

ENDNOTES

1 Finding the whole series of the Softsel *Hotlist* from 1983 would be of great help.
2 The Apple II US market share is around 23% in 1981 (Donovan 2010, p. 55).
3 The Adventure Game Interpreter (AGI) is a game engine developed by Sierra for *King's Quest* in 1983 and used for 14 titles until 1989.

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