Who Made That Last Game? The Alternative Chronology of the 8-bit Era in Poland

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The discourse of *firstness* (Suominen, Sivula, 2014) is omnipresent in the history of video games. While the latter is often understood in terms of history of innovation, game historians (enthusiasts or academics) repeatedly focus on "the first" and tend to ask questions about the first video game (i.e. published in a certain country), the first iteration of a given genre or the first game to use a specific formal property. Even though, the master narratives created by this discourse are now being challenged by various scholars (Swalwell, 2015; Therrien, 2015), there still seems to be far too little research into late stages of different game history phenomena. This paper will attempt to fill this gap in regard of local chronologies of the 8-bit era.

The choice of Poland as a case study is especially interesting, because the 8-bit era reached Warsaw with an initial delay. Poland experienced a significant lag in the diffusion of computer technologies due to the CoCom (Coordianting Committee for Multilateral Export Controls) embargo on sales to the countries behind the Iron Curtain (Budziszewski, 2015). Until the collapse of the communist system, it was not only very expensive but also very hard to purchase an 8-bit microcomputer. After 1989 and during the time of transition from the economy of scarcity to the capitalistic system, Polish gamers were flooded with old gaming machines from the West. Although, Atari stopped its support of the 8-bit computer line in 1992 (Loguidice, Barton 2014), it was still very popular in Poland until mid-1990s. As Kluska and Rozwadowski (2014) describe it, Poland became the Last Fortress of the "Little Atari". However, even this "Fortress" had to fall eventually.

The end of the 8-bit era can be linked to the discontinuation of cassette use as a mainstream data storage device for video games. Accordingly, the last games to be published on a cassette in UK came out around 1993 – e.g. *Mayhem in Monsterland* (Apex Computer Productions, 1993). But the commercial death of cassette in Poland came later. The first distressing sign was the declining interest of local mainstream publishers, such as LK Avalon. Until 1995 many game designers created their projects for outdated platforms and still found their audience (e.g. *Miecze Valdgira* series), so called Polish late 8-bit games (Garda, Grabarczyk, 2014) were hits on the local market. However, in 1996 new 8-bit games – e.g. *Knoorkie: The Pig* (Ossowski and Maroński, 1997) – experienced difficulties in finding a publisher (Kluska, 2015). Finally, a relatively small company – TimSoft – decided to support the project. A comparable publishing house – Sikor Soft – is probably the last one to publish an 8-bit game on a cassette in the 1990s: *Tekblast* (Sikor Soft, 1998).

But the chronology of the 8-bit era in Poland is not that simple or teleological. Games published by Sikor Soft or TimSoft might have been the swan song of the commercial era of the 8-bit generation but they were also the dawn of a different phenomenon. Interestingly, the period between 1997 and 1998 is the rise of retrogaming (Reunanen, Suominen, 2015). Paweł 'Sikor' Sikorski might have entered the 8-bit scene rather late – in mid-1990s – but the crucial fact is that he never left it. Until this day he is an active retrogamer, still producing software for the "Little Atari". The final act of the first lifecycle of the 8-bit generation in Poland overlapped with the ascent of retrogaming internationally. What is more, there is no true ending to the 8-bit era, while new games are being developed till the present day.

Keywords

game history in Poland, 8-bit era, local game histories

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