EUROPEAN VIDEOGAMES OF THE 1980S

From *Space Invaders* to *Defender*, The United States and Japan rapidly emerged in the 1980s as the economic titans of a fledgling industry, dominating both the arcades and the living room. Meanwhile, economic and linguistic boundaries forced the European branch of videogame history to follow a different path, both in terms of technology and creativity. European games of that period have a distinctive flavor which reflects the socioeconomic situation of European countries at that time, as well as the distinctive cultural history of those countries.

Teaching at a North American university, we found that students and professional designers alike were largely ignorant of the European history of games, beyond a small handful of global hits, which they had not realized were made in Europe either. To a certain extent, European history has been erased in the discussion around games in the American academy and industry. We sought to address this erasure by developing a class teaching the history and cultural context of videogames in Europe as part of the curriculum of our Game Design degrees at the NYU Game Center. One of the challenges in developing our curriculum is that there is a marked absence of academic research on this topic, and this lack of writing is something we hoped we could begin to address with this special issue of *Well Played*.

In the field of digital game history, there is a growing number

of academics working on the field of local histories all over the world, as a counter current to the current hegemonic historical discourse. These local histories not only tell the history of different games, but different game makers, players, and means of production and distribution. Rather than focusing on successful or mainstream games on console and arcade platforms, these scholars also use a variety of methods to tell stories about work at the margins of the industry, from ethnography to platform studies. This is the community of scholars that we appealed to in order to find the best contributions for the present volume—we hope that the articles here demonstrate both the specificity of these studies as well as the variety of topics and methodologies. We heard from authors with a number of different theoretical approaches—for example, Suominen and Ruomanen's "A Finnish Pac-Man Clone for the VIC-20 from 1984: Program Listings as a Means of Sharing Games Through Magazines" uses platform studies as a lens through which to understand two technologies that were essential to the development of European games: the VIC-20 and the BASIC programming language.

One of the major technical divergences between European games and the games of the United States and Japan came from the difference in the available platforms. For example, constraints on international trade made videogame consoles unavailable or prohibitively expensive in many European countries, which left home computers as the dominant platform of game development. The predominance of home computers resulted in games that were very different because of the variety in computer platforms of the period; compared to arcade machines or consoles, computers had much more memory but much less advanced display capabilities. They emphasized keyboard and (eventually) mouse interfaces rather than joysticks and gamepad controllers. The limitations of the platform often spurred virtuoso programmers to find ways to make the best

of computers where 64K RAM was a luxury—a regular text document on your phone right now probably takes up more memory. As an example of this type of achievement, Jaume Esteve investigates *La Abadía del Crimen* in his article for this volume. *La Abadía* is a Spanish game originally for the Amstrad CPC 6128, and then ported to other 8-bit computers of the time; its achievement is that it simulated a medieval abbey, with numerous AI-driven agents and a complicated, real-time mystery plot — a perfect example of a game that could not have been developed for the console market at the time.

One of the reasons *La Abadía del Crimen* is so little known outside of Europe is that it was not translated to English, like many European titles of the time. With so many different languages in Europe, and an absence of an infrastructure for localization, any games that had a substantial amount of text could hardly attract many players outside its country of origin if it was not written in English. These linguistic barriers nevertheless presented opportunities in the form of unlicensed localized ports and clones, an effect which is explored Ricardo Fassone's "Cammelli and Attack of the Mutant Camels: A Variantology of Italian Video Games of the 1980s", which examines the ways in which clones have the effect of 'de-canonizing' influential work in games, by examining the peculiar case of an Italian clone of Minter's *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, published as a code listing in an Italian magazine.

One of the aspects that we aimed at highlighting in this issue was the socio-economic context that these games were developed in. Localization – or rather, its absence – is but one aspect of what made European games different. One of the main economic factors was the limitations on the trade to the Soviet Bloc countries, which could not import the home computers or arcade cabinets that were available commercially in the rest of Europe. While Western and Japanese computer equipment was available to Soviet gamers on the black market, official trade was

restricted in order to spur the production of Soviet computers and software. Instead of creating their own models from scratch, the Soviet countries developed their clones of foreign computers, such as the Sinclair ZX Spectrum and the PDP-11. Smith and Fanfarelli's paper on the Russian Game 'n Watch clone *Nu, Pogodi!* is a case study that examines hardware cloning, in this case by looking into an important clone of Nintendo's Game & Watch portable consoles.

Although it may seem a mysterious inclusion in this issue on European games, Helen Stuckey's article on the seminal Australian adventure game adaptation of *The Hobbit* shows how similar the Australian context was to Europe's in terms of the games that could be made and played in the 1980s. Australia shared with Europe a protectionist trade policy that made console games prohibitively expensive, and the games that were produced there were also often products of the affordances of the home computer platform. Stuckey positions *The Hobbit* as a pioneer of simulation in narrative game design, alongside other European classics like *Lords of Midnight* and *La Abadía del Crimen*. *The Hobbit* was also influential on European games because it provided the model for interactive fiction, which is often referred to as *graphical text adventure*, where the text interactive was accompanied of illustrations. This is different from the model that Infocom and Scott Adams set up in North America throughout the 80s, which mostly consisted of text-only adventure games and only started incorporating images at the end of the decade.

We are pleased to present this collection of games on the early European (and Australian) history of videogames, but we would be remiss if we did not take the chance to call for more research in this area, particularly on the forgotten local histories of games. In our research, we were able to find fascinating and unique games made in East Germany and in the USSR, and in Scandinavia outside the well-documented demoscene, yet there

is very little recorded history or contemporary cultural writing about these games in any language. It is important that we capture the histories and impacts of these games while they are still in living memory, so that the cultural history of the medium is not ceded entirely to its economic conquerors.