Early Games Production in New Zealand[1]

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ABSTRACT

This illustrated paper reports on the early digital games industry in New Zealand, during the late 1970s and 80s. It presents an overview of this largely unknown history, drawing on in depth archival research, interviews with key industry participants and collectors. It discusses the local production of consoles, handhelds, and arcade games in this market, as well as anomalies of distribution of game systems widely available elsewhere, which was the context for this production. While relative isolation – geographical and policy driven – accounts for part of the booming manufacture during this period, the paper questions how helpful it is to treat early local games production as just a phenomenon of the local. While it is sometimes strategically useful, it is argued that this production of locality can mask more complex intersections between the local and non-local – or global – factors, the heterogenising aspects of globalization in this period of early digital games.

Keywords

Early Games, New Zealand, Console, Arcade, Local, Global

Recently, I have been engaged in a research project investigating the local history of games in New Zealand, a relatively small country in the South Pacific. If New Zealand is considered at all, it is usually considered insignificant in terms of early games history. The map in the front of Jaro Gielens' book *Electronic Plastic* that depicts the major sites of handheld game manufacture confirms this: New Zealand is just another blue country on the edge of the map in which no handheld game development took place [5]. The pink colouring on this map is limited to the U.K., U.S., and Japan, where, it is usually assumed, all the early game production took place. While it could not be considered a major market or production centre, New Zealand does have a

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unique heritage of locally made game hardware and software. The history of this production is interesting for several reasons, not least because of the quite extraordinary levels of activity. The first part of this paper briefly summarises findings about the local production industry, and discusses several factors which shaped games production during the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as the lack of distribution of some game machines in this market.

This little known history comprises unexpected stories about an example of local game manufacturing. It needs to be investigated, recorded, told and conserved, something that will be partly accomplished by the "GamePLAY" exhibition being prepared by the museum, Te Manawa. The second part of this paper considers how the localness of this history, and other histories like it, might be conceived. Despite New Zealand's isolation, there is clear evidence of connections with the "outside" during this period. Though it can be tempting to look back to the "good old days", the mixtures between local and non-local (or global) early game-related items and local receptions of overseas technologies provide compelling examples of what Roland Robertson has referred to as the "heterogenising" aspects of globalisation in the early digital games industry [9].

ANOMALIES AND LAG

One of the most interesting expectations I encountered in this research was the perception that New Zealand lags behind the rest of the world when it comes to technology. This is slightly strange, given that the people also have a reputation as 'early adopters'. I have been able to determine that many big name systems associated with early games did make it to New Zealand. These include Atari (2600, 7800, 400/800, XE), Apple, Sinclair (ZX81, Z88, ZX and Spectrum), Commodore (including Vic 20, C64), Amiga, Sega (SG1000 and SC3000 computer as well as Master System, Megadrive), and Nintendo (Game n Watch, NES, Super Nintendo). There is, however, also some truth to the perception of lag, in terms of anomalies in the way that early games arrived in New Zealand. While it is hard to determine the dates on which these systems were released locally with any accuracy, the general sense I have got from conducting archival research is that New Zealand releases were usually a year or two later than in major markets (shipping and import restrictions were two factors that caused delays in the early years). The ZX81 provides an example here: originally released in 1981, it is advertised in the November 1983 issue of the New Zealand computer magazine, *Computer Input*, for $199; by Christmas 1984, David Reid Electronics is selling them for $99, "under half price". Other anomalies relate to which games systems and computers actually made it into the country.   Certainly in the late 1970s and 1980s, there were uneven patterns of distribution of early consoles and computers. Systems that do not seem to have made it to market in New Zealand include early consoles such as the Vectrex, Coleco and Intellivision. The collector Michael Davidson writes that he has never seen or found any of these systems in New Zealand [3].

LOCAL MANUFACTURE

At the same time, however, there is a quite remarkable level of local games manufacture going

on. I have found evidence of four different early consoles with labels indicating they were made in New Zealand (Sportronic, Tunix, Fountain, Videosport). The earliest of these seems to be the Sportronic, made by Orbit Electronics, of which there were several models available. It sold in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Davidson has one with a receipt from Christmas 1980 [1]), and was basically a "Pong" clone, built with the GI chip. Advertising for this system – like so much from the period – features a smiling family gathered around their television set. The Sportronic claimed it was introducing New Zealanders of the time to a third TV channel ("Introducing the third TV channel"), an interesting early rendition of thirdness in relation to games (Playstation's "third place", Nicholls and Ryan's "Third Space", after Soja [8], etc).

Consoles

Apart from console manufacture, New Zealand also has a fascinating arcade history. It remains a retro arcade gamer's paradise, with many arcades still in operation and early arcade machines liberally dotted around cities and towns. At my last count there were as many as 11 companies that were involved – at one time or another and to a greater or lesser extent – in arcade game manufacture (a revision of this number may be necessary as the research progresses – some may just have been distributors). Chastronics and Kitset Electronics (Kitronix) are two important early companies. The former was involved very early in arcade manufacture, from the late 1970s as I understand it, as well as having an interest in several Christchurch arcades, a model of vertical integration that a number of other companies would later adopt. Unlike its competitor, Kitronix didn't run arcades, but did write its own games. The Kitronix games "Malzak" (1981) and "Panix" (n.d. as yet) initially appear to be 'clones' of the well-known games "Scramble" and "Space Panic" respectively. However, when the ROMs of these games were dumped to MAME and analysed, it was found that their code is unlike any other known game, suggesting that though they may have borrowed visual design and gameplay elements from these games, they were in fact written locally from scratch [10].

Arcades

The involvement of so many companies in the early arcade manufacturing business does suggest the 'why' question: Why were so many companies in such a small country eager to make arcade game machines? What caused such a number of local entrepreneurs to try their hand in the games industry? I have not yet found comprehensive answers to this question. For the purpose of this paper, I will confine myself to explanations deriving from specifically local conditions, leaving aside the more general climate of interest in games, which I assume was also a significant factor driving demand. It is likely that some companies were local offices of larger companies based elsewhere, as the name of Taito-tronics, suggests. Another part of the answer is presumably that not all of the companies wrote games themselves, in the way that Kitronix did. A number of companies seem just to have been involved in the importation of arcade games.

New Zealand's system of import licensing exercised a decisive influence on the local arcade

production industry, in that only those who had import licenses were able to bring game machines into the country (legally, at least).[2] These licenses were difficult to come by which meant that those who had them were in a privileged position, often making a lot of money. As well as on-selling machines to other arcade operators, a number of import license holders seem to have run arcades themselves (they would have had a significant advantage on their competitors, being able to secure machines for their own arcades at cost). Inversely, it could be that some arcade owners became involved in making their own game cabinets, in an attempt to cut out the 'middle man,' and so were only involved in a limited way. Certainly arcade operators banded together in buying consortia after import licenses were scrapped, in the mid 1980s.

The large size of arcade game machines seems to have been a further factor that helped grow the industry. To ship pre-assembled cabinets to New Zealand would have been very expensive. It was far more economical to import the boards and build cabinets in which to house them, locally. The size factor, together with the tax concessions that were apparently available for goods that were (at least partly) manufactured locally, goes some way to explaining the large number of companies who were involved in the production of arcade cabinets and games. This is an area in which further research is needed.

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF THE LOCALNESS OF THIS HISTORY?

Turning now to more conceptual questions, one of the challenges games historians are faced with is how to make sense of local divergences in what is now such a thoroughly global industry. This raises questions about how local histories such as New Zealand's ought to be studied. Isolation and distance from the rest of the world seems to have been a major factor contributing to the development of its local production scene. Government licensing requirements and tax incentives further shaped the scene. Because of these factors, it is tempting to treat the local games production scene as if it grew up separately from production elsewhere in the world. Contrasts with the present nature of the games industry – in which there are virtually no opportunities for small scale local production – suggest themselves here. In a nostalgic moment, it would be easy to treat this local flourishing as a "pure" moment, before control of the industry had sedimented around the much larger global players who now dominate. This would certainly fit with the New Zealand discourse of an innovative, do-it-yourself culture, where isolation is proudly identified as breeding the national characteristic of self-reliance, and a 'can do' attitude.

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[2] New Zealand's system of import licensing began in 1938, when Import Control Regulations were initially introduced. These regulations, which were then intended to control expenditure and help build up secondary industries, made it illegal to import any goods except under the authority of a license granted by the Customs Dept. They were suspended for a time, before being reintroduced in 1958, as part of the Labour Government's 'Black Budget'. The late New Zealand historian, Michael King writes that it was the "temporary drop in overseas reserves" which triggered this decision and brought the "highly unpopular reimposition of severe import controls" (p. 433) [6]. Quite dramatic changes were brought about in the mid 1980s, when parallel-importing decisions led to the rules being changed.

While this conception of the local might be an effective tool for imagining the national community, such an unproblematic 'local' approach is unable to adequately account for the complexity of factors that contributed to the games industry in 1970s and 80s New Zealand. It also produces what it purports to study. What I began referring to as a "local" New Zealand industry is not exclusively local. Rather, it is clear that local and more global influences are already imbricated in New Zealand gaming in this period. In pointing out the limitations of an isolationist local approach, it is useful to adopt a "glocalist" approach, after Roland Robertson [9]. He notes that there is an assumption that globalisation overrides locality, and adopts this term to highlight what he terms "the heterogenising aspects of globalisation".

In the New Zealand case, there are a number of local/global involvements that vitiate against what I've termed an isolationist account of the history of early game development. Here I present examples of three ways in which the local industry was marked by heterogenisation. First, there is constant contact with the wider 'outside' world of digital gaming. While not all overseas products make it to New Zealand, some of the important systems do: Atari's 2600 (VCS) console is one of the earliest. A typical story told by informants is of their desire for Nintendo Game n Watches, displayed by proud friends at school; though Game n Watches do seem to have been for sale locally, many lucky youngsters had them brought back as gifts from overseas (private communication). Furthermore, at least one company (Kitronix) exported arcade machines to Australia in the period.

Second, 'the local' is already constructed on a pan- or super-local basis in the New Zealand case. Some "New Zealand made" game systems were not entirely made locally, or appear to have just been locally branded, in early global distribution deals. One of the "New Zealand" consoles, the "Tunix", appears to be identical to the system known by Canadian collectors as the "Leisure Vision". Canadian collector CongoBongo explains that "Many view [this console] as an Emerson Arcadia 2001 clone but this is incorrect. The machine that is the guts of the Leisure-Vision appeared in many forms in many countries not as clones but as licensed systems" [2]. Asian electronics manufacturing centres also play an important part during this period. I understand that Grandstand's New Zealand business selling handhelds/tabletops saw them working in partnership with R.R. Fenton (later Mattel), importing machines from Japan and Hong Kong, shooting the plastics and assembling them locally in New Zealand. Indeed, Grandstand is a company whose circumstances and involvements point up not just the overlap between the local and the global in this history. It's partly thanks to Grandstand that the U.K. is coloured pink on Gielens' map – they are an important company in handheld game history in the U.K. After the company's establishment in New Zealand, they were the distributors of a number of important computer systems, namely the Sega range (SC-1000 and SG-3000) and later, Amstrad. This brings me to my third point, the way that global products are effectively "localised". The early Sega computers, particularly the SG-3000, developed a wide and loyal following in New Zealand. There were user groups, as well as locally published magazines: *Sega Computer* was devoted entirely to the system; others, such as *Bits and Bytes* had regular Sega columns. New Zealand software for the system also proliferated, with a good proportion being games (a list is available online) [4].

CONCLUSION

By way of concluding, I want to celebrate the fact that New Zealand's significant, but little-known, national games history is being researched with a view to presenting it to the public in an exhibition (www.temanawa.co.nz/gameplay). These are stories that need telling. The materials also need conserving. While I am advocating some caution over the term local in terms of its framing of historical issues, it may be necessary, ironically, to campaign for these digital games to be recognised as local artefacts, if they are to be preserved. The issue of game archiving is an urgent and challenging one and supra-national efforts are required to convince developers and governments that archiving these fragile and complex digital objects is necessary and worthwhile. Developing software solutions and strategies to ensure games' preservation is probably also something that will benefit from international input and collaboration, transcending national borders. However, in cases where there are significant local variations in games hard and software, or where uniquely local games exist (as in New Zealand), a strong national approach will also be needed to complement international archiving efforts. At this stage, there are no institutional moves afoot in New Zealand to preserve the country's early digital games heritage. In the course of my research, I have come across a few remarkable amateur archiving efforts, and would concur with Andreas Lange's salute to collectors as the best chance some digital games have of being preserved, for the time being at least [7]. This material is fragile; nothing coordinated is being done; and it is in danger of being lost. There is a clear and urgent case for a local institution to take responsibility for these games.

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