Disappearing into the Mirror:
Robert Maxwell and the Early UK
Videogames Industry

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LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR

Robert Maxwell’s influence runs as a red thread through the UK videogames industry. From his involvement in the Sinclair-AIM group of companies in the 1970s (Dale, 1985) through to the battle for the worldwide distribution rights to Tetris (Ackerman, 2016), culminating in the takeover and ultimate dissolution of Mirrorsoft, then the UK’s largest publisher of games software in the early 1990s. Maxwell’s interest in the growing UK games industry was neither accidental or isolated, but a strategic investment of resources. As Jim Mackonachie, the founder of Mirrorsoft testifies, ‘If you’re looking for the long term, you have to recognize that it’s a very young industry . . . it’s a long term market with a long shelf life’ (Mackonachie, cited in Minson, 1985).

Maxwell’s keen eye for the latest technological developments partly drove the modernization of newspaper printing presses in the UK through the introduction of desktop publishing (Bower, 1992). Yet, it was, in his son Kevin Maxwell’s words, ‘the love of the Game based upon money and power’ which was the catalyst for his being a ‘collector of businesses’ (Bower, 1995: 18-19). Mirrorsoft was one of these collectibles and a rare profitable star in his constellation of loss making enterprises. This love of power and money through the message of the game gives Mirrorsoft one of the most sparkling, if lesser known, tales to tell among Maxwell’s many narratives.

RESEARCHING THE MIRROR

In spite of the broad and deep influence of Mirrorsoft, concerted research into Robert Maxwell’s relationship to the UK videogames industry has been minimal. There are three main reasons for this. First, Maxwell’s life was as mysterious as his death, with a study by Bower (1995) identifying that only Maxwell himself knew the full intricacies and machinations of the 400 companies he was involved with when he died. Second, of greater importance to those charged with investigating the financial impropriety and corporate mismanagement of Maxwell’s companies were the misappropriation pension funds of Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN) which formed
the basis of a criminal trial in 1995 and an exhaustive, expensive, Department of
Trade and Industry investigation, (DTI, 2001) into MGN. Third, and as a direct result
of the above, is that the position of Mirrorsoft, and other companies in the UK and US
are integrated and ultimately concealed into myriad other companies sequestered
within Maxwell’s corporate structure.

This paper outlines the beginning of an extended study into Robert Maxwell’s
influence on the UK videogames industry from the mid-1970s through to the early
1990s. Through archival research of legal and business documents and press reports,
Mirrorsoft’s origins under the guidance of Jim Mackonachie at Mirror Group are
identified and early examples of media convergence between cartoon strips in The
Mirror, and initial Mirrorsoft titles for home microcomputers are seen (Hewison,
2005).

MAXWELL’S MIRROR

Following the acquisition of Mirror Group Newspapers in 1984 and its subsequent
integration into the corporate structure of Maxwell’s firms, Maxwell continued to
extol the benefits of technology to further his own sphere of influence. One of the
best examples of this was in the convergence between Maxwell’s desire to modernize
the printing presses of the UK with the introduction of electronic desk top publishing
for The Mirror newspaper and the 1986 publication of Fleet Street Publisher for the
Atari ST, an application which continues to be published in highly modified form as
Timeworks Publisher.

Mirrorsoft, although initially a smaller concern of Mirror Group, continued to use the
international sway of MGN to great effect and expanded and stimulated the
burgeoning videogame industries of the UK, Europe and US. This included
bolstering many influential, but lesser known firms, such as London-based
videogame-distributor Microdealer, magnetic-media repair company Software Shelf
and the US’s First Star Software, developers of the Boulder Dash series and widely
believed to be the oldest videogame firm operating under continuous management,
until its integration into BBG Entertainment in January 2018.

REMEMBERING THE MIRROR

Reinforcing in-depth archival research this paper provides insight from primary and
secondary data from those contracted to and working with Mirrorsoft at the time.
This includes staff from UK software houses Sensible Software, Bitmap Brothers and
Revolution Software. Secondary data found in various historical accounts (e.g.
Caulfield and Caulfield, 2015; Penn, 2013; Harris 2016) offers an insight as to the
extent to which Mirrorsoft influenced the publication of videogames in the UK in the
late 1980s and early 1990s.

However, as these secondary historical accounts tend to be general recollections of
the early UK industry, rather than ones with a specific focus on Mirrorsoft, primary
data gathered through one-to-one interviews can substantiate – if not always verify –
secondary data. It is important to use data from these sources carefully given that
people are recounting experiences from many years ago and to which they may not
always have perfect recall, even between people who have shared the same offices or
worked at the same company (see e.g. Penn, 2013).

DISAPPEARING INTO THE MIRROR
Even at this early point of the research, archival, primary and secondary data indicates that Maxwell’s games companies’ influence throughout the international games industry was considerable. By the late 1980s they had reciprocal licensing agreements in place with American software house Spectrum Holobyte, a developer of technically astounding flight simulators, provided official software charts to EMAP magazines, such as *Computer and Video Games* and was one of Maxwell’s few companies which was operating in profit by 1991 when his empire collapsed.

For the UK developers tied to Mirrorsoft, the dissolution of MGN meant the outlook was bleak. Their success and profitability during the winding up of MGN resulted in their being listed as creditors to the pension fund which had been criminally misappropriated by Maxwell.

The paper ends by arguing that the dissolution of Mirrorsoft was one from which the UK games industry never fully recovered. Its loss was keenly felt, in terms of being able to support the transition from a parochial, idiosyncratic development culture marked by small teams working on open platforms, to a globalized, standardized development culture working on closed platforms. As one of the few bona fide international publishers based in the UK as part of a media network, it is argued that Mirrorsoft had the potential to smooth this difficult technological and cultural evolution, the outcome of which is speculative given that Mirrorsoft’s potential was never fully realized.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


