

From Technological Revolution to Cultural Obsolescence. NEC's PC Engine between American erasure and French edification

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A recent publication from *L'internationale*, entitled “Decolonizing Archives” (2016), insists on the necessity to acknowledge and defuse prevalent cultural biases in documentation institutions. In order to avoid constructing one-sided – commonly Western-centric – narratives, historians need to have access to inclusive and expansive archives. When it comes to videogames, a phenomenon that still lingers in-between trash and cultural legitimation, very few archives seek to preserve the memory of the medium extensively. In this context, historical narratives of the medium's edification hold tremendous power over which games (among tens of thousands created in the last 60 years) will be remembered and preserved more comprehensively in emerging archives. In “What is video game culture?” (2010), Adrienne Shaw pointed out the lack of reflexivity when it comes to the edification of cultural landmarks in the history of the medium. Similarly, in “Playing Games With Cultural Heritage”, Joanna Barwick, James Dearnley and Adrienne Muir highlighted how various preservation institutions appear to rely on *a priori*, implicit knowledge of which games are important (2011, 385). The PC Engine platform represents a prime example of the occultation process currently at play: the Japanese console, which failed commercially in North America but gained cult status in Japan and in some parts of Europe, is nearly absent and/or misrepresented in major historical accounts. How did such a cult platform, produced by one of the biggest Japanese corporations, become nearly invisible in English journalistic and academic accounts over the course of 25 years? This paper will present cultural biases that led to this erasure in US-centric historiography, and provide a counterpoint through the case study of a fan-made French documentation project. *La bible PC Engine* (2009/2012), like many other publications emerging from Pix'n Love, sheds light on the Japanese platform and its many international reincarnations.

Popular journalistic accounts of video game history typically don't provide a lot of information about the PC Engine. *1001 Games You Must Play Before You Die* (Mott 2010) only lists one title clearly associated with the platform (Hudson's *Bomber Man*); a game library of 700 games, many of which were critical and commercial successes in Japan and North America, has all but disappeared from view in this account. Few words are dedicated to the platform in Steven Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. Considering the TurboGrafx-16's lack of success in North

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America, this is hardly surprising. Yet the author's focus on the system's demise (when so many other consoles have failed more strikingly) is rather puzzling. Similarly, the platform hasn't been a major focal point in most contributions emerging from video game scholars. Despite our habitual fascination for technological innovation and first instances, the PC Engine CD-ROM² – the first CD-ROM expansion in video game history – is nowhere to be found in *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology* (Smith 1999). Leonard Herman – the self-proclaimed “game scholar” – provides useful documentation about the console and its CD expansion in the fourth edition of *Phoenix*. The relative failure of NEC's platform in the United States can also be felt in the discrepancy emerging for some of these facts; while most accounts state that the CD-ROM² was released in Japan first in December of 1988, Herman's book kickstarts this major innovation by a few months (2016, 182). *Video Games around the World* (Wolf 2015) features a chapter on Japan in which neither the PC Engine nor NEC computers are discussed. The author has favored Sega in her historical overview of important corporations, claiming that it is *Sonic the Hedgehog's* rise to fame in 1991 that shook Nintendo's grounds (DeWinter 2015, 323) and created an incentive for the creation of the Super Famicom. The prevalent narrative echoes the US-centric “Sega vs. Nintendo” corporation war that is so prevalent in North American accounts. This construction appears to be deeply ingrained: discussing the creation of the Super Famicom, Kent goes so far as to declare “Japan remained loyal to Nintendo, ignoring both Sega's Mega-Drive and NEC's PC Engine” (2001, 431). As Arsenault points out in his platform studies book on Nintendo's system, it is in fact the success of the PC Engine in Japan that shook up the big N's plans (2017, 43).

It is surprising to find such blatant historical distortion for a system that has been celebrated for its many technological innovations. A North American bias clearly shows through in this brief inspection: in a context where so many new games continue to feed our obsession of technological supersession and commercial expansion, NEC's failure in the US acts as a logical selection criterion. Thankfully, another voice has contributed to preserve the history of PC Engine gaming in our Western imagination: the French fan community. This is rather surprising: personal computers were much more popular than consoles in France during the 1980s, and the console was never officially released by NEC in this part of the world. Thanks to Sodipeng, a local importation company that emerged in 1988, the console started to gather a cult following. The platform held a strong presence in popular French magazines such as *Tilt* and *Joystick*; Sodipeng could afford full page advertisement and reviewers were fascinated with the games. French PC Engine fans gathered on the NECstasy forums since 2001. On this platform, a small group of contributors started to envision the project that would eventually become *La bible PC Engine*, edited by Pix'n Love under the supervision of Florent Gorges. On top of interviews with NEC and Hudson personnel, these volumes propose an overview of all the games released from 1987 to 1999 and relates ongoing investigations about rarities and unreleased titles. Historical contributions from fans often remain under appreciated, and this paper will be an opportunity to acknowledge all this labor through a specific example. In the case of the PC Engine, these contributions represent the only sustained effort that will allow future historians to immerse themselves in the protean landscape of cultural production on NEC's platform.

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