Squeezing and extending the platform: The case of the Sinclair ZX Spectrum

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Keywords

platform studies, Sinclair ZX Spectrum, game history, obsolescence, Czechoslovakia

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Histories of gaming platforms tend to emphasize the chronological, sequential order in which they were launched. This logic reflects the interests of game hardware manufacturers, who invest heavily into advertising the "next big things", while providing limited support for previous platforms, eventually making them obsolete (Newman 2012). As a result, particular platforms seem to be tied to a particular time period or a "generation". User practices, however, do not reflect this logic completely. People do not simply throw away an old computer or a gaming device whenever a new one arrives on the market (Sterne 2007). When confronted with the potential commercial demise of their platform, users utilize a range of strategies to prolong the lives of their machines.

This paper aims to enrich platform studies (Montfort and Bogost 2009) by providing concepts that capture the social dynamics of the maintenance and upgrading of platforms by their user bases. In order to identify and analyze these practices, the paper uses the example of the Sinclair ZX Spectrum platform in early 1990s Czechoslovakia. The Spectrum was the most popular 8-bit platform in Czechoslovakia (and since 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) thanks to unofficial imports from the West, and its later sustained support from Didaktik Skalica, a domestic manufacturer of Spectrum clones. While in the West, the platform was already considered obsolescent around 1990, it remained popular in the former Eastern bloc countries as an affordable entry machine. Games and productivity software for the platform continued to be released in (former) Czechoslovakia until 1995. However, Czechoslovak Spectrum owners in the 1990s started to realize that Spectrum is becoming outdated and actively participated in the efforts to postpone its obsolescence.

The paper builds on a qualitative textual analysis of the 1990–1994 issues of *ZX Magazine*, a Czech magazine dedicated to the ZX Spectrum platform. From the 26 issues of the magazine published during the five years, I excerpted all articles which included at least one explicit commentary on the platform. Using thematic analysis, I have identified three basic strategies related to the platform: *treasuring* of the platform, *squeezing* the most out of it, and *extending* it via peripherals and interfaces. Each of these activities manifested

both through discourse (discussions or magazine articles) and through software and hardware projects, which were described in the magazine. The three categories can be applied to many other platforms; while this paper highlights the prominence of these practices at the tail end of the Spectrum's lifespan as a commercially viable platform, they can be also observed at the height of a platform's prominence, and are especially typical of retro scenes (Suominen 2008).

By *treasuring*, I mean the reaffirmation of the Spectrum's status as a founding platform of the country's hobby computing scene, as well as the repetition of historical narratives about the platform's origins and its "legendary" developers. Treasuring also manifests in modifications of "classic" games and building of one's archives of classics.

By *squeezing*, I mean the expressions of the belief that the small machine keeps offering relatively limitless potential. Spectrum users observed that the quality and sophistication of games and productivity software for the Spectrum had been rising since the platform's launch, thanks to the programmers' ingenuity, as well as the growing knowledge of the platform's quirks and undocumented features. We can call this process *platform utilization progress*. *ZX Magazine* writers hoped that this progress would continue indefinitely: *"Every year, I wonder if the Spectrum will survive the year, and every year I'm surprised that it does. [...] The quality of programs is rising, although the Spectrum still remains the same as those eleven years ago…"* On many occasions, they praised games that achieved something that had been previously considered impossible on an 8-bit machine. Thus, the game *Iron Lord* was praised because it *"again gets our computer closer to what people play on PC computers"*.

People also documented, discussed and suggested various ways of *extending* their Spectrums by modifying their hardware, or by connecting it to various kinds of peripherals or other computers. These extensions often exceeded the scope of uses envisaged by the machine's designers. Some users were replacing the original Spectrum's rubber keys with "professional" keyboards intended for use with 16-bit machines. Spectrum enthusiasts were also writing homebrew drivers for dot matrix printers, which started to become affordable for the domestic consumers around 1992, or built interfaces which allowed the transfer of data between a Spectrum and a 16-bit computer.

The analysis of the aforementioned three sets of practices can serve as a step towards systematic research into user practices related to particular platforms. At the same time, it contributes to game history by showing that social lives of platforms resist the logic of perpetual obsolescence.

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