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Documentary film and the (re)production of the 1980s UK game industry

ABSTRACT

As a medium older and more established than the digital game, film has certainly played a role in documenting its trajectories. Through audiovisual essays and narratives we can be introduced to game artifacts alongside the contexts of their creation, distribution and reception. The older medium avoids a problem of abandonware and emulation, whereby games are preserved but are devoid of the temporal specificity and popular excitement often so important to their meaning. Yet there are always problems with such documentation; film, with its limited capacity for immersion, can only represent and relate narratives about gaming. As such, it alienates viewers from the content and mechanics of such games, relegating them to the position of a passive viewer.

This paper looks at three specific attempts to explore the history of the UK game industry. *Micro Men* foregrounds a rivalry between two of the largest UK computer manufacturers, Sinclair Research and Acorn Computers. The film abandons the traditional documentary format in favour of a dramatisation with some added archival footage. Of particular interest and irony is the extent to which the focus of the film is on the competition to produce the BBC's Micro project; while both the aforementioned companies were critical of the state broadcaster's intervention, both competed for the contract mindful of the publicity and sure sales that would be associated with the project. Unlike computer development in the United States or Japan, British computer entrepreneurs relied on public funding even as they publicly denounced the concept. It should not go unnoticed that this film was itself produced by the BBC, and that it seems to feed into more recent attempts to reform the state education curriculum and to regenerate a UK computer culture.

From Bedrooms to Billions, a crowdfunded project by Anthony and Nicola Caulfield is due to come out this September, and relied on the enthusiasm of nostalgic Eighties gamers and younger retro enthusiasts. From donations they have to date raised over £80,000 pounds, around double their initial target. While they interview a number of significant figures in the game industry from the period, it is perhaps noticeable that many of their interviewees remain connected to

gaming in some way and were at least moderately successful. There appears to be little inclusion of those who are now critical of the industry, or who were exploited or marginalised within the game production industry. The title of the film suggests it will be a triumphal narrative for the UK's £2 billion dollar industry, but the finished film remains to be seen.

Opificio Ciclope's 2003 *Spectrum Diamond: The Myth and Legend of Matthew Smith* is an older, more abstract project, created by a collective based in Bologna for Finnish state broadcaster Ele and French network Canal+. Unlike the aforementioned films, the documentary focuses not on the game industry as a whole, but rather on two games, *Manic Miner* and its sequel, *Jet Set Willy*. Their plot was numerous, superficial, but nonetheless foreboding, taking place only a year before the National Union of Mineworkers strike and subsequent destruction of the UK labour movement. Rather than interviewing important figures or creating a conclusive narrative, the documentary focuses on replicating the affective context of the games, speculating about the rediscovery of this obsolete console by a Finnish teenager, Theo. Matthew Smith, the young programmer who would disappear before producing a third sequel, is cast as the Syd Barrett of the 80s, producing tortured art that marks the free fall out of industrialism. While the former titles comprise laudable efforts to narrate the past of the UK game industry, only the latter title is able to transcend representation, providing an experience that is far from linear and profoundly ludic.

A punk microeconomy, the UK video game industry in the 1980s exhibits notable differences from similar markets in the United States and Japan. At this point, the global integration of new media production was far from complete. Today, while the United Kingdom still has a lively development community including some notable mid-size, stand-alone developers, some development franchises associated with larger multinationals, and a number of critically acclaimed indie producers, it can hardly be considered an autonomous industry. Vallance (2014) notes the relatively small number of indigenous producers in the modern development ecology, arguing that among other factors this is responsible for the contemporary lack of concentration of software producers around urban or creative centres. Izushi and Aoyama, (2006) on the other hand, argue that there is little evidence in the UK of communication or creative diffusion between the video game industry and local comic or animation production, as with Japan, or with film production, as the United States. The game industry was dependent upon itself for content and experience. Johns (2006) argues that there is still a distinct European market, dependent upon the region's reliance on the PAL television format, but elsewhere notes historical connections between the UK and US game markets; her work also illustrates that the consolidation of UK developers happened rapidly in the early 1990s. Charting and understanding this trajectory of economic change is difficult process; while there is a range of work in the social sciences on the industry as it exists today, historical quantitative data can only tell us so much about how production was organised. This

paper therefore takes an alternative approach, looking for qualitative illustration in a number of documentaries produced in the recent years.

Little work has been done on documentary films that take games and the cultures surrounding them as their subject, despite the increasing popularity of such films. Fullerton (2008) and Poremba (2011) have looked at the relationship between games and documentary, but their work focuses predominantly on how games have remediated the documentary form. “Docugame” developers produce immersive historical simulations that employ archival material and/or historical characters or events to both educate and ethically or affectively provoke players. Another synthetic medium that fuses documentary practice and gaming is the emergent “e-sports”; while there is an impetus towards live material, the inclusion of formal elements such as narration and the focus on characters outside the game – in this case the pro-gamers – mean that there is certainly also influence from other documentary media. While there are films about the experience of players (see *Frag* and especially *Free to Play*), increasingly the majority of coverage is live or near-live, following the conventions of television broadcasts of sporting events. Kaytoue et al. (2012) study the twitch.tv platform, arguing that casual gamers often prefer to watch other players than play themselves and that this live streaming represents a novel kind of entertainment that further democratises the so-called gaming scene. Carter and Gibbs (2013) note tensions in another popular e-sport community as the developer alternates between restricting tournament rules to make games fully comprehensible to non-players, and encouraging a vibrant, if sometimes opaque, metagame. This synthetic medium of live-streaming games both draws from documentary practices and ensures that the practice of recording gameplay is normalised, benefiting future archives.

In the game preservation community, a split exists between those who would preserve games in a playable form, and those who would prioritise recording gameplay instead. Newman is foremost amongst those who would argue for the latter; in the 2012 text *Best Before* he argues that fundamental problems with emulation mean this established model of preservation is flawed. Newman writes:

That so much of what games have to offer is based on contingencies of play must surely lead us to question the primacy of playable games in the game preservation project and encourage us to consider the possibility of a need to shift the balance from game preservation towards gameplay preservation. [...] While for many it exists as a valuable supplement to the business of game preservation, I wish to suggest that a documentary approach is well suited to respond to the diversity of play and the susceptibility of games to the configurative, transformative acts of play as well as underpinning any project based around the preservation of playability. (2012, p. 158)

Newman shows his enthusiasm for practices such as Speedrunning and for the increasing popularity of so-called Let's Play videos: videos where players post themselves playing contemporary or historical games and commenting on their performance and experience (2013, p. 61). The focus on emulators – software programs that allow games from historic platforms to be played on modern platforms – is problematic for Newman because emulated versions of games both differ from original versions of the game and from each other, making authentic experience impossible. Furthermore, contemporary players do not play games within the same social and political context, their experience of the game situates it not within its artistic, generation milieu but instead as a nostalgic or antiquarian fetish. Documentation of gameplay – whether historical or contemporary – can more properly situate games within their context, while foregrounding the subjectivity of the player's encounter.

Simple video game play cannot, however, tell us altogether too much about the material conditions of development, production and distribution in the video game industry. Furthermore, it is hardly certain that historic games are more than a marginal, passing interest. It is for this reason that longer documentaries about the varied histories of game development are of scholarly interest; both because they can complement more procedurally sound contemporary research in geography, sociology and economics related to the video game industry, but also because their popular reception suggests that this social history of gaming may be of interest to wider audiences. That being said, however, it is clear that documentaries are never neutral. In this paper, it is argued that film and television documentaries have the capacity to illustrate the context in which games are developed, produced and distributed. Documentaries, however, also have their own production contexts; these invariably affect the way in which the content of the documentary is presented, inclusions and omissions. This paper looks at three documentaries on the UK Game Industry of the 1980s; while there is a great deal of room for comparative studies of the way different historical periods or regional markets are presented, that would require a larger study that is beyond the scope of this article.

DREAMLAND: STATE DRAMA IN MICRO MEN

Micro Men begins with a short documentary-style clip detailing Clive Sinclair's impact on the electronics industry. This sequence is presented in the style of television special from the period in question; while this sequence is fictional construction made for the movie, its usage of stylistic conventions reminiscent of Eighties news broadcast both situates the events within a particular time period and gives the film an authority as guide. The 2009 television film then shifts into its dominant style, that of the dramatisation. Sinclair is told by the government executives funding his company that certain, more exotic elements of his research are not supportable with taxpayer money; he subsequently explodes with rage at everyone around him, his employees included. Contrary to the

impression given by the leading segment, Sinclair is not the protagonist; this role belongs to his employee and subsequent competitor, Chris Curry. Sinclair then falls into the role of antagonist; he is paranoid, railing against the limitations placed on him by state control and, in a scene that stylistically references the spy thriller, asking his employee Curry to quit and work for him at a secret Cambridge start-up. In the film, Sinclair is initially dismissive of computers despite Curry's enthusiasm for them; Curry instead goes into business with Hermann Hauser, founding Acorn. After Sinclair is given a "golden handshake" by the now government-owned Sinclair Radionics, he appears unsettled until walking past a newsagent sign announcing Margaret Thatcher's ascension to Prime Minister. Sinclair declares a "fresh start", throwing away his cigarettes, selling his Rolls Royce, and entering the emergent computer business. This marks the conclusion of the first act, which has shown the method by which this film will illustrate the game industry of the 1980s. Its predominant focus is on two specific companies and their key players, rather than the industry as a whole; it also is heavily focused on the production of hardware platforms as opposed to software development. By making a dramatisation, the producers of the film inevitably allow inaccuracies in order to facilitate narrative flow; they compensate for this in their use of archival footage, simulated reenactments of such footage (including mock news reports, used in lieu of narration), and the use of authentic consoles as props. These threads are woven into a film that is very much an elegy for a certain imagined British computer hardware industry.

The second act foregrounds the importance of a BBC project to encourage computer education. Both Sinclair and Curry were initially furious at what amounted to state-funded advertising for a single computer product, but were seemingly also upset that the state-operated broadcaster had not decided the computer to be featured through open competition. Perhaps hypocritically, they both wanted a shot. The film shows Sinclair contacting Curry, conspiratorially suggesting they work together to open up the competition; in actuality, Sinclair had never heard of the proposed broadcast when Curry contacted him about it (Anderson and Levine 2012, p. 36). The change is relatively minor, but is an illustration of how Sinclair's personality is exaggerated, while Curry is made to appear more neutral. Acorn, who attempt to match the specifications of the BBC, defeat Sinclair, which insists on its own specifications. The foregrounding of the BBC's intervention and the identification of Curry – the chief executive of the company that would eventually receive the contract to produce its BBC Micro – as the protagonist cannot be ignored for two reasons. Most important is the fact that this television movie was produced for and screened on a BBC channel; it naturally risks becoming a triumphal narrative, a documentation of the computer industry that foregrounds the BBC's (and indirectly the state's) role within it. The irony of the fact that characters such as Sinclair, and indeed Curry himself, are critical of state intervention in industry can hardly be lost.

To a lesser extent this also feeds into the politics of the ascendant computing revival; though the film predates the Conservative electoral victory in 2010, and the subsequent announcement of changes to the computing curriculum in 2012, the ideological concept of a synthetic, even “synergetic” relationship between government and business, particularly high-tech, creative sector business, is not particularly partisan. As Barbrook (2006) and Pratt (2008) have shown, such a partnership was also encouraged in the economic policy of New Labour, the formerly social democratic party in power at the time. A critical fragment of the film is the inclusion of an archival clip wherein Margaret Thatcher demonstrates a Sinclair console to the Japanese prime minister during a 1982 visit; in an associated press conference, Thatcher announces: “I’ll be pursuing the possibility of increased sales in Japan of highly competitive British goods and I know that you’re doing more to try to open up the market for more imported goods and I’ll be hoping to strengthen the industrial and technological links between our two countries” (Thatcher, 1982).

Despite the supposed commitment to free market practices, the government is frequently called upon to support businesses. In return, entrepreneurs are held up as national icons; Sinclair was subsequently knighted. It seems unavoidable therefore that due both to its documentary-drama mode and the context in which it was produced that the film would adopt a “Great People” model of history. Perhaps notable is the fact that the screenwriter for *Micro Men* had produced the screenplay for another BBC historical dramatisation, entitled *Margaret Thatcher: The Long Walk to Finchley*. While filmmaking is a collaborative process and it would be unfair to conflate the production of a documentary on a person with an explicit endorsement of them, this does suggest the type of character that is conducive to the format.

The third act is introduced with a universal frustration. Curry’s staff realise their platforms are unpopular without a large catalogue of games, and consequently produce a lower cost, stripped down console called the Electron. Meanwhile, Sinclair is having trouble breaking into the professional market; his QL is suffering from significant production problems and consequentially delays. Sinclair alternates between shifting his focus to renewable transportation – his often mocked but remarkably prescient electric tricycle – and berating his employees for the delays in production. After Curry is left with a full warehouse, he worries about his staff; after a film minute of contemplation, he decides to run the advertisement highlighting the Electron’s much lower return rate when compared with Sinclair’s competing ZX Spectrum. A fight breaks out when Sinclair confronts him about it, though this scene is exaggerated for dramatic effect. “Poor Clive was made to look like a lunatic” says Curry (Anderson and Levine 2012, p. 44). A subsequent on screen conversation between Curry and his second-in-command Hauser illustrates the dual messages of the film.

“Curry: It’s official, we’re a joke. Hope all the people we have to lay off see the funny side.

Hauser: We’re not a joke, Chris. The bottom has fallen out of the whole market, that’s all. It’s the same for everyone.

Curry: It’s the same for Clive...

Hauser: Does that make you feel better?

Curry: *pauses, smiles* No, it doesn’t.

Hauser: I’ll go and start letting everyone know...

Curry: What are they all going to do?

Hauser: They’re clever people, they’ll think of something... Maybe they already have... (Micro Men)

In the background, there are two project specifications scrawled on a blackboard. The first, the ARM chip, is perceived to be the lasting legacy of the UK computer hardware industry.

The subsequent scene shows Sinclair and Curry reconciling over a pint in a pub. Sinclair extorts the resilience of British amateurs: “the quiet chap scuttling off his shed to work on that idea that he and he alone knows will change the world”. Sinclair then reveals his plans for a flying car, only to have the landlady call “last orders”. The landlady is a cameo by Sophie Wilson, who is in the real world the author of the instruction set for the aforementioned ARM chip and – it is implied – one of the “clever people” mentioned by Hauser. A concluding scene then summarises the problem with this imaginative, if somewhat distracted mindset; footage of the actor playing Sinclair in one of his patent electric tricycles is intercut with footage of Sir Alan Sugar, the entrepreneur with little knowledge of computing that bought his country. The shot then opens up to reveal that Sinclair is riding this tricycle on the highway – a risky procedure – as lorries pass him on both sides. The lorries are branded with the names of the computing giants of today, all American megacorporations. The film is incredibly enjoyable and a good example of effective mixing of dramatic, archival and faux-archival footage. Nonetheless, it appears overly patriotic; one cannot help but relate this to its conditions of production.

HAPPINESS AND LIGHT : CROWDSOURCING REFLECTION IN FROM BEDROOMS TO BILLIONS

The trailer for *From Bedrooms to Billions* opens with enthusiastic games journalist Gary Penn describing the affective environment of the early 1980s: “There was that new frontier, there was a sense of a new medium, there was a sense of a cultural thing occurring, there was a sense that anyone could do anything or make anything happen”.

Jon Hare, an artist and producer for Sensible Software asserts that “we were in a position in the UK where we were ready for something to happen”, while Julian Rignall, another journalist, adds that “it was very new, it was an industry

that was making it up as it went along”. The approach taken by producers Anthony and Nicola Caulfield is described as the “ensemble interview”; rather than using the voice of a single or small group of narrators, they intercut interview footage from journalists and developers in order to produce a coherent narrative through montage. In an interview with the [London] Metro’s David Jenkins, Andrew Caulfield describes how the project was originally pitched to the BBC and commercial networks, the documentary – originally planned as a three part television series – was rejected because games – particularly retro games – were seen as a “niche” interest (2013). After the successful broadcast of *Micro Men*, the show was picked up by the BBC, only to be dropped again after a month.

Caulfield describes beginning research for the project in the late 90s, and being motivated by the absence of contemporary UK developers; he also notes specifically the absence of UK producers, something noted in academic research by Vallance (2014). The producer is cautious about how he talks about the integration of UK developers into foreign supply chains; initially, he cages his statement with “I’m not saying that it’s bad...”, but when the interviewer suggests it might be he affirms that actually “it’s a crying shame”. That being said, the documentary appears to be developing in a different direction than the seemingly patriotic *Micro Men* discussed previously. Here, it is argued that the crowdsourced production has a triumphal narrative, but one that is not overtly about the self-affirmation of British inventiveness. Instead, the documentary is a valorisation of the importance of independent, small-scale developers against larger production companies. Caulfield’s words show the extent of the consolidation also documented in Johns’ (2006) research :

There’s a very interesting statistic actually, in the early ‘90s there was a 22 month period where we saw an almost 78 per cent drop off in financial activity of UK companies working on video games between ’93 and ’95. Which is almost a straight line on a graph. And that means money being generated in the UK by UK businesses and the money staying in the UK. By ’95 most developers were owned by Sony, Ubisoft, and various other companies. So the money was obviously going outside of the UK. (quoted in Jenkins, 2013)

Kuppuswamy and Bayus (2013) look at the vitality of public crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, suggesting that it differs from traditional investment models both in the quantity of investors – there are a greater number of small scale investors – and the quality and level of feedback provided by those who have a stake in the project. The decision by producers Nicola and Anthony Caulfield to raise the funding for their project on Kickstarter and similar platform Indiegogo has invariably affected their product. It is notable that unlike others funded on the platforms, they are not amateurs; both have had considerable success making documentaries and films receiving funding from traditional sources. Employing two different platforms was an unorthodox move, but

one that proved to be successful, gaining a greater degree of public and media interest. While in the earlier, Indiegogo campaign uses photos of the producers in archival photographs from magazines and offers material rewards to large-sum backers, the later campaign uses the social capital of confirmed interviewees, including things such as autographs and personal objects, in order to solicit even greater donations. While a detailed study of the crowdfunding campaign is beyond the scope of this article, it is notable that the funding generated by the project exceeded the initial goals and established a responsive target audience before the campaign had concluded. One can discern a third stage of the campaign in the mailings sent to backers; fans were invited to help source archival footage, suggest possible interviewees, and even perform complex technical tasks to facilitate certain sequences. While this engagement is without a doubt rewarding for fans and will enhance the quality of the finished product, scholars have critiqued the capacity of digital media platforms to entangle fans in forms of unremunerated labour. It is also of importance that the creators of this documentary have a background as producers; while the editing and cinematography is of high quality, it could be suggested that production skills are important for all artists in this emergent world of indie production.

The film was expanded greatly due to fan participation and the flexibility of the funding structure, but was not brought out until long after its projected date of completion, making a review of its content for the initial draft of this article impossible. That being said, however, an eighteen minute clip entitled *Metal* gives a good impression of both the formal structure and the overarching ideological grounding of the film. The title is a reference to “bare metal” coding, the coding in assembly language practiced by early programmers on platforms with limited memory and processing power. One can draw two major messages from this segment. The first is that the limitations of storage formats – which meant computer users had to type in program listings line by line – helped to improve computer literacy amongst the general population, including those who would not go on to become programmers. Another commentator tells us that the network of computer publications acted as an early internet – a distribution mechanism for code, techniques and commentary. Yet the general enthusiasm of early coders also was open for exploitation. Nigel Adlerton recalls convincing a headteacher – who was shocked students would want to attend school any longer than they were forced to – to hand over the keys so they could come in early. Anthony Crowther, another interviewee, recalls that this indulgence went further at his school. Library staff noticed that enthusiastic computer users were skipping lessons to use their computers, and so set them to work producing software that could be sold to other schools; in return, the students got an occasional free lunch. While the computational culture of the 1980s was in some respects more novel and accessible, it is also important that other elements are not obscured: in this case, the problematic use of child labour by school administrators.

In the trailer, to cite another example, an unnamed commentator speaks of the instant acclamation afforded to successful developers: “It was a fame and stardom that none of us were prepared for... and it hurt a lot of people”. The next scene shows Matthew Smith, developer of *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*, asserting that “there’s a group of people for whom the 1980s was a magical time full of... full of happiness and light.” It’s unclear whether Smith is making this comment sincerely or with a degree of irony; it is also unclear whether the directors are using it to contrast with the preceding and subsequent fragment, or in sequence with them. The next scene is from a 1984 documentary – *Commercial Breaks* (Paul Anderson) – and shows the fall of Imagine Software, as bailiffs lock employees out of their workplace. Along with Imagine’s dissolution, the depression and disappearance of Smith is one of the most well known elements of 1980’s UK gaming mythology. This short sequence is suggestive that the film has the capacity to be self critical of the computational culture of the 80s, but then the film’s criticality is necessarily limited by the biases of its funders, many of whom would not have indulged the producers were it not for a latent and rose-tinted nostalgia that they likely want reflected in the film. The Caulfields are left with an awkward situation; either they abuse the trust of their funders and produce a film that shows all sides of the gaming industry, or they indulge them and produce a film that is simply another form of triumphalism.

SECRET LEVEL: DOCUMENTING DISAPPEARANCE

Spectrum Diamond – produced by Bologna film collective Opificio Ciclope – is the shortest film reviewed here, fitting into an hour television slot. It is also the oldest, having been produced in 2002 and screened in 2003. The conditions of production are also the strangest; while the producers were Italian, the film was made with funding from the Spanish affiliate of French television corporation Canal +, to be screened on television in Finland. They use contemporary footage, but a range of obsolete and dated film cameras, giving the footage an aesthetic that is more dreamlike than dated. Unlike the other documentaries mentioned, it uses a narrator; the narration was the first component to be written, and the documentary has been structured around that. The narrator, however, is hardly an authoritative voice; the producers reveal that they “wanted a phantom presence as a narrator, a spirit child to guide thru the years and cities”. The use of a teenager from a foreign country, too young to remember the subject of their documentary, means that the film has a mythological quality. While *Micro Men* looks at the pioneers of British hardware, and *From Bedrooms to Billions* explores the software industry as a whole, *Spectrum Diamond* looks at a single series and its disappearing creator.

The games – *Manic Miner*, and its sequel *Jet Set Willy* – were produced by Matthew Smith, at the time a teenager. Jenkins (2013) describes their lasting significance: “30 years later and they’re still the best example of a British made video game that actually feels British”. They hold a psychedelic quality,

drawing influences from popular culture, cult media, and current events. Jodi – perhaps the best known producers of game art – created their piece *Jet Set Willy Variations* in 2004 as a tribute to the series, hacking the titles to foreground their psychedelic qualities. *Opificio Ciclope* engage in a similar tribute through the medium of documentary video. They explore not only the games but also the spaces in which they were created; Wallasey, for example, where Smith had lived while developing the game. Many segments of the documentary are shot on antiquated film cameras, with special filters or lenses, making the landscapes they shot seem surreal. This is certainly in line with their stated aim; they “tried to look at England like a multilevel game.” While they don’t directly address the wider context of social, political and economic change, it is certainly implied through some of the interviews and sequences. As opposed to the revolutionary moments portrayed in *Micro Men*, or described in *From Bedrooms to Billion*, *Spectrum Diamond* implies a lost battle, adopting an elegiac tone. An interviewee, identified in the transcript only as “man in the pub”, describes how his environment has changed:

Buses used to be on time. Cheap fares. Everyone was subsidized. People were working. Everybody had a job. Families were happy, you know. Now they’ve just build all the promenade... Looks nice, but there’s nothing there anymore. So it’s like a ghost town, really.
It’s changed over the years like...

There is also a fascination with mythologies. Firstly, there are those referenced in the games, which *Opificio Ciclope* try to understand through local and vernacular sources. There is the “priest’s hole”, for example, a level in the game that has its origins in the hiding spots of 16th Century clerics; the producers ask some of the interviewees to explain it. They are similarly fascinated with in-game characters; in *Jet Set Willy*, the titular character is ordered to rearrange his house by his housekeeper, and the producers encourage an interviewee to speculate on the strange relationship between them. There is also another type of mythology investigated; that of the game’s production, and of the notable disappearance of its producers. The producers claim they “never looked for traces of Matthew Smith, (the girlfriends, the family...), not really”. Yet this is because their film is not about drawing conclusions, or making statements. Instead, it is about using the ambiguous nature of documentation, and the consequential ambiguity of documentary film as a medium. They open a discussion, asking questions not only of experts but of peripheral and even unrelated figures. They create Matthew Smith as a mythological character, a video game character. One source relates that “He was so rich he could use ZX Spectrums to proper-fix tables, because the legs wobbled, or to hold open the door”. Other sources describe his subsequent disappearance. The producers interview other

figures from younger generations; reenactors, who took up the task of producing their own versions of the games they had loved.

After Theo, the teenage narrator, reveals that the disappearing character has been found, it is not an invitation for resolution, conclusion. Instead, they cut to Steven Smith (unrelated), who with others had started a website to track sightings of their programmer hero. Steven Smith relays information received that he was creating new vehicles, or staying in a Dutch commune, or working in a fish factory. Strangely, the narrator joins in, providing information of his own of ambiguous authenticity: “I first met Matthew when he was rich and famous and he still knew how to draw a good party. I recall a free bar under the stairs and magic mushroom tea for all. The rest of evening is lost in a blur”. Steven Smith repeats another myth; that the programmer Matthew Smith is actually a codename for the computer. *Opificio Ciclope* follow an exegetical, speculative approach to the information they have obtained. They mix fiction and folklore in with documentary evidence, though not to make the material easier to digest, as in *Micro Men*. Instead, the inclusion of strange, unrelated statements, characters and material does two things. It creates an interactive, affective environment, similar to that created by a video game, through which the viewer must navigate. In addition, it reflects the winding, quest-like path taken by the film’s producers, who lacked discernible hierarchy or direction. At Software Products, where Matthew Smith worked while producing his second title, one of his colleagues attempted to explain the strange production environment to a visitor: “People see everybody wandering around and think, they’re idle. But as long as they produce a program, we don’t care how they do it. Some of them sleep here” (Bourne, 1984). One might meditate on the extent to which the documentary filmmakers’ loose organisation and random, playful approach mirrored the production conditions of the video game studios where their research subject worked.

CONCLUSION – PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

This paper has attempted to analyse and contextualise three contemporary documentary films, showing how their portrayals of the British Game Industry are necessarily, though not completely, conditioned by their funding sources and conditions of production. Study of films cannot replace formal research in the social sciences when it comes to understanding the history and modes of production within the industry itself. Yet just as the production conditions of documentaries necessarily affect their content and message, the conditions under which research is produced can similarly affect its conclusions. In thinking about how production conditions necessarily affect – if not shape entirely – practices of documentation and presentation of historical technology usage in the cinematic format, we are implying that other research might be similarly affected. The museum display and the academic paper should certainly not to be excluded from (self-)critical analysis. It is worth noting that none of these

documentary ‘films’ has had a traditional cinematic release; two were released on television, while one has only been available as a DVD ordered from the internet. This should not exclude them from analysis as films, but should indeed encourage a renewed commitment to the notion of “expanded” cinema. This concept, originally advanced by Gene Youngblood in 1970, has been reformulated to apply to documentary-inspired art films in gallery contexts, and material distributed through or as digital media (see Rees et al., 2011). Yet the intersection between video-games and cinema provides another space in which the boundaries of cinema are blurred and its practices are altered.

In a large auditorium above EGX – one of the largest trade shows in Europe with a recorded attendance of over 70,000 – a crowd of enthusiasts took their seats for the eagerly awaited premiere of *From Bedrooms to Billions*. An acquaintance pointed out members of the “retrogaming” scene: journalists from a range of vibrant online (and, increasingly, print-based) communities, veteran developers from the period working on eagerly awaited comeback titles, collectors and archivists whose vigilance ensured the preservation of a great deal of vintage software and hardware. That being said, it was hard not to feel the event was somewhat disconnected from the massed crowds of teenagers below; while indie gaming, following a similar production model to that of games from the era, and retro aesthetics, wherein modern games appropriate low resolutions and limited palette for artistic rather than technical reasons, have become increasingly popular, this has not necessarily translated to a true revival of popular interest. The increased capacity for producers to fundraise amongst dedicated audiences means that projects can be assured of a certain success before they are completed – this applies not just to films, but also books and even projects to replicate hardware.

Many of the published contemporary resources I have been using to study the history and material culture of this era have been self-published; though this practice predates the origin of crowdfunding, recent projects have certainly benefited from the increased visibility and accessibility of audiences. A range of material has emerged, including first hand accounts of working in the game industry, recollections of software and of hardware. While some of the material has been published on larger presses, others have been released by small presses or independently by the authors. Though it is important to note that this does not detract from the value of the source, methods of production, which increasingly means financing and distribution more than material manufacture, have an effect on the presentation of material. A trade off ensues; what works well with Kickstarter backers and other enthusiasts does not necessarily work effectively with the public as a whole. The result may be beneficial for the technical or social researcher, who can make use of technical specifications or intricate recollections that might be edited out of a mass-market book. It may also be more aesthetically pleasing; recent titles have put to shame the trained designers of major labels. The production model of “by fans, for fans” short circuits the awkward processes of legitimation in an empowering way. That being said, this

also excuses the increasing absence of any other model. Graham Smith's editorial on the popular online games magazine RockPaperShotgun, while specific to audiovisual journalism, makes the case well; he notes the absence of the BBC, the UK's public broadcaster, in discourses surrounding video-games (2014). As such, efforts at presentation, documentation and analysis are accountable to corporate interests, whether consolidated and large, or small and diffuse.

This note on the relationship between the provenance and consequential perspectives of three films may seem pedantic, and it is hardly conclusive. Yet as the current UK government continues to significantly overhaul its methods of teaching history and computing, films and other forms of documentary media will have a significant influence on audiences seeking to understand the development of the creative industries. This is not to fault the films mentioned here; rather, I am suggesting a diversity of production methods is important to maintain. If care is not taken to ensure a variety of viewpoints, made possible by a range of possible funding sources, it is easily possible that a skewed perspective might inform future generations of designers, engineers and entrepreneurs. Crowd funding, because of its ability to mobilise and ensure the support of certain audiences, may be incredibly appealing, but it is important that other forms of funding – state funding, funding from corporations, academic and cultural institutions – remain available. Video games, because of their mutability, rely on other media such as cinema for their adequate preservation. Yet as they are themselves becoming (or returning to being) increasingly open to experimental mechanics and aesthetics, we can surely hope that they similarly will encourage significant experimentation in cinematic presentations of their history.

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