Review: *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France, 1960-1991 : des labos aux chambres d'ados*, by Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon. 2020. Pix'n Love. 447 pp.

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In *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France, 1960-1991 : des labos aux chambres d'ados* [A History of Video Games in France, 1960-1991: From Labs to Teenagers' Rooms], Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon explore the birth and growth of the video game industry in France, from the creation of the industry to the internationalisation that occurred in the 1990s, when the singularity of French production from the previous decade came to an end. The book seeks to challenge common assumptions about the French gaming landscape while revealing previously undocumented parts of its history. To achieve this, the authors have interviewed a wide range of industry professionals, allowing a variety of voices to add their unique perspectives to the story of the development of the French video game industry.

Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France actively promotes the importance and benefits of studying videogame history through previously unexplored national contexts. Prior research on the video game history has focused mainly on American narratives, such as the book *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture* by David Kushner (2003), with the occasional inclusion of Japanese games and companies as seen in *The Ultimate History of Video Games* by Steven Kent (2001). This approach was then diversified by Tristan Donovan's (2010) *Replay: The History of Video Games*, which provided a comprehensive history of video games by exploring multiple countries and different scales of production. This inspiration can be felt in Blanchet and Montagnon's book, as the authors focus on a specific country and go in depth to explain the unique ecosystem that allowed for the development of games with a distinctive French flair. The book is divided into five chapters that chronologically explore the birth of the industry.

The first chapter delves into the early attempts to develop interactive software in French universities and schools in the 1960s and early 1970s, and describes how the first video games were created by

students. For example, the authors interviewed Paul Braffort, a student of artificial intelligence in 1960 who was a member of Oulipo, an association that sought to create new literature through ludic creations. Braffort became a pioneer of interactive software and an inspiration for other similar creations in French academia. Blanchet and Montagnon note that he was not interested in selling his works, and because of that, the wider public never became acquainted with his work.

In the second chapter, the reader learns how American software was introduced in France, bringing video games to the French public. In 1973, café owners were offered the chance to acquire a new type of game, not unlike jukeboxes and flippers, called *Pong* (Atari Inc., 1972). Arcade games soon became a top-grossing product in these entertainment cafés, but they never managed to be profitable on their own. Eventually, the arcade declined in importance around 1983 and died out around the turn of the century.

The third chapter explores the introduction of home consoles in France between 1974 and 1985. The authors explain how the video game crash of 1983 actually occurred in 1985 in France because of delayed publishing, with international games usually arriving in the country two or three years after their transatlantic publication. Nonetheless, the sharp decline in sales pushed for an earlier shift to computer software than in the United States.

In the fourth chapter, Blanchet and Montagnon detail how the French government, and particularly the Ministry of Culture, started investing in video game studios as early as 1986. These funds led to a diversification of computer game companies. It is in this chapter that we can feel the authors' impressive documentation work. They write about a dozen studios, detailing their areas of expertise, from Infogrames and its vast publishing empire to Coktel Visions and its interest in literary and political games. The authors explore this vast landscape and seek to illustrate its incredible diversity.

In the final chapter, the authors emphasise the specificity of French game production. The chapter presents the studios that were involved in the adventure genre and their particularities. The main conclusion of this chapter is that the uniqueness of French adventure games like *Mewilo* (Coktel Vision, 1987) lies in their frequent use of political and social themes, which distinguishes them from their anglophone counterparts.

The scientific material collected by the authors is remarkable. The bibliography and appendices are a goldmine of resources for those interested in studying the history of video games in France. These sections contain references to press articles, government and judicial reports, theses, and a wide variety of other documents collected by the authors.

Moreover, the book is not merely a summary of different accounts: It discusses games, cites them extensively and, for the most part, contextualises them, which is helpful in visualising what the industry looked like at the time. Additionally, the text offers a unique perspective by problematising many of the events, such as the 1983 crash, and guiding the reader through the socio-historical context of that period. It is only in the last chapter that this reflection gets a little difficult to follow, as the authors condense a great amount of information and questions into a limited number of pages.

What is most memorable about *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, in addition to what has already been highlighted here, is how the authors demonstrate repeatedly throughout their monograph that games are not to be studied in isolation. Blanchet and Montagnon repeatedly show the direct link between French game design and the country's political and economic situation. It cannot be overstated how this kind of historical work allows researchers and readers alike to better understand the work of independent creators from the past such as Muriel Tramis or Froggy Software. As for the specificity of French video games and studios, it has mostly been standardised by English and American production since the turn of the 1990s due to the lack of international success of French studios. What emerges from this book, however, is a French legacy of unique games and franchises that ventured beyond traditional fantasy and science fiction settings. Reading about specific national histories of game production helps to move beyond the anglophone classics. In particular, this book, along with others (e.g., Švelch, 2018) provides plenty of opportunities to rethink what we consider to be the pillars of video game history.

Finally, it should be remembered that the history of the French video game field cannot be fully covered in a single book. This is why the authors have made clear in the book that there is a need to investigate the press coverage of video games in France, especially the first dedicated publication of the 1980s, *Tilt.* They remind the reader of the importance of the press for both video game consumers and professionals. *Tilt*, in particular, was a unique place to observe the many tensions and the diversity of the French industry. Further research into the press could help to complete the work done in this book on the video game culture of the 1970s and 1980s.

The book repeatedly emphasises that the 1980s represented a unique time in French video game development. During this period, French studios could develop games independently and rely exclusively on the francophone market, enhancing their unique qualities. However, in the 1990s, the growth of the industry made such production impossible. It would therefore be valuable to conduct this type of historical research in the three decades following the research period covered in this book to gain a deeper understanding of how the 1980s impacted the subsequent years of French development.

Overall, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France* represents a major step towards the emancipation of French video game history. It facilitates a wide array of research, ranging from close analyses of particular games to studio monographs. This book will be a valuable resource for historians and game scholars due to the extensive data presented.

References

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