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The Platform and the Player: exploring the (hi)stories of Elite

by Alison Gazzard

Abstract

Histories of computer games in the 1980s are often fixated on American and Japanese perspectives with the developments of pre and post-crash America being used as a way to contextualize the global gaming scene. However, the 1980s in Britain saw a computer game culture emerge, embedded with writing code, with numerous programmers releasing their games on tape or floppy disk in response to the demand of games for home computer systems at the time. This is a culture that developed separately to 'pre-crash' American gaming and one that is so often lost in global histories of videogame cultures today. Similarly, mainstream nostalgia for games of the 1980s can be seen to mask the original responses and sites of game creation. This article explores the landscape of British computer games through a case study of *Elite*. Utilising archival methodologies inherent in media archaeology, combined with approaches from platform studies, a history of Elite is approached through both its original development and the players' responses to the game at the time. In doing so, the importance of British videogame history is placed amongst other more dominant histories to show how its influences continue in the development and production of games today.

Keywords: Game history, Britain, BBC Micro, media archaeology, platform studies, Elite

Introduction

On the 5th November 2012, David Braben, along with his company Frontier Developments, launched the *Elite: Dangerous* Kickstarter.[1] As stated on the front page of the Kickstarter site for the project, "'Elite: Dangerous' is the latest instalment of a long series of epic space games, starting with 'Elite' - one of the most successful games of the 1980s." The Kickstarter project's ambitious £1.25 million target was finally met 48 hours before the 60 day deadline, showing not only the growth of what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) term to be "spreadable media", but also the recognition of the fans of the franchise in wanting to make the next game in the series an actuality.

The archival nature of the World Wide Web, and the 'spreadability' (Jenkins et al, 2013) of ideas across continents and cultures makes not only access to the Kickstarter project a possibility, but provides a way for players and fans to remember the original computer game *Elite* (Braben and Bell, 1984). In fact, it is this same spreadability of ideas, game culture, magazines and experimentation that led to the creation of *Elite* in the first place, in an offline form.[2] The culture of 1980s game development was fuelled by access to information about computer literacy, computer programming, and the availability of microcomputers. Beyond the computer hardware other resources took the form of magazine articles, television series, radio shows, books and word of mouth between those developing for the systems at the time. Subsequently in an age of user-generated content and greater web accessibility in parts of the developed world the growth of documenting these resources from scanned magazines now downloadable as pdfs and television series uploaded to YouTube to emulators and ROMS of the games themselves shows how the World

Wide Web allows for a constantly growing archive of past media artefacts. Similarly, the accessibility and ease of access to the web in connected households allows users to search archives developed by fans, enthusiasts and even the game developers themselves. As Suominen (2008) notes, "As for the cultures of history within the games, the past is present in a person's own memories of playing, and, among other things, in the collective memory represented on the Internet and on-line discussion forums." However, as noted by Swalwell (2013) these memories of playing may become determined by what she terms to be "game lovers" and how many of these accounts of games can be "emotional and nostalgic". It is this sense of nostalgia as offered not only by "game lovers", fans and enthusiasts in their documentation of games online but also the game companies themselves as a way of keeping particular game franchises alive that can often lead to a masking of game histories in the public domain. The paradox of nostalgia creates both a mask and a means of searching online archives of material often created by enthusiasts that aid in the telling of other histories of games and play.

This article reframes what might be seen as the mainstream nostalgia of a world of American and Japanese games to recognize the nuances and influences of individual platforms as sites for game creation in Britain. Starting with an examination of the BBC Micro platform as the original site for creation in terms of its hardware limitations *Elite* is used as a case study for exploring various facets linked to exploring the histories of computer games. By recognising the role of the BBC Micro in the creation, and subsequent distribution of the original title, we can also start to reveal other histories about the reception of *Elite* by players at the time through uncovering the archives of magazines linked solely to the BBC Micro computer. Subsequently this article questions the notion of 'firsts' as so often placed on histories of games and technologies as a way of reframing the original experiences in creating and playing the game. Combining platform studies approaches with media archaeological methodologies helps to highlight other 'alternative' histories of the game's original reception amongst the player community and expose some of the realities of *Elite* beyond the nostalgic memories so often left as traces online.

The mask of nostalgia

It can be seen that the Elite: Dangerous Kickstarter plays on what Svetlana Boym (2001, p.41) terms to be "reflective nostalgia' defined as "longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance." As Taylor and Whalen discuss, " when a game migrates to a new platform, it invites a nostalgia turn as players recall the attributes of prior versions" (2008, p. 9). Our nostalgia for 1980s technologies is ever-present in both European and American societies today. As Parikka (2012, p. 3) notes in his discussions of retro in relation to media consumption practices, "partly this can be explained by the personal attachment that the current young consuming middle-class (now in their 30s-40s) who were the first generation to grow up in the midst of personal computers and gaming." Although the players longing for the qualities of the original game can help to extend the longevity of game franchises or lure fans into supporting the development of subsequent ones, these models of nostalgia can prove to be problematic when considering game histories. The players longing for *Elite*, and the video/computer games of the 1980s can be skewed by these nostalgias, and in turn affect the collective memory that often develops out of how they think the game once was. Our nostalgia for 1980s gaming, or certain games in particular, mean we can often lose focus as to how those games came about, how they were originally received and subsequently some of the original platforms related to these games are not always recognized as sites of development.

In her discussions of early digital games Swalwell (2007) states, "Nostalgia is currently the dominant motif of remembrance, as companies market nostalgia-led purchasing and consumption." Large companies re-releasing games such as *Pac-Man Anniversary* editions keep these franchises alive through the nostalgic qualities that such games can provoke combined with the hope of enticing new audiences. This can also be seen in various re-makes of*Super Mario*

Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), repurposed for Nintendo key-ring *Game & Watch* style merchandise, and the Atari-style plug and play joystick that recreates ten-in-one game remakes. These are seen as important to the industry themselves as a way of continually capitalizing on past successes. However, this type of "technostalgia" (Swalwell, 2007) can also mask other histories of games by keeping particular game entities alive as those brands continue. On the whole these material objects, such as the iconic, simplistic design of the Atari controller, or the characters apparent in *Super Mario Bros.*, *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) or even the alien figures in *Space Invaders* (Taito Corporation, 1978) continue as icons of a videogame past. These are symbols of a 1980s youth, a continued 'retro' history that continues to be repurposed from games to t-shirts and various other associated merchandise today.

Kline et al (2003, p. 226) discuss this rise in merchandising after the 1980s stating, "Since the early 1990s there has been a concerted effort on the part of videogame console makers to saturate youth media culture with branded products". The 1990s continued to draw on the marked successes of stand-out games that were ported from arcade to micro to console for a wider audience as possible. Even though particular platforms also often ported their most successful games during the 1980s and beyond, the iconicity of certain brands does not necessarily translate as simply as others causing them to become lost as stories of playing rather than acts of continued play by current generations. As Huhtamo (2011, p. 28) notes in his discussions of following the "topoi" of media, "new products are promoted as being packaged into formulas that are meant to strike the observer as novel, although they have been put together from ingredients retrieved from cultural archives". In many ways it is the nostalgia associated with certain generations of games that often places them as 'new products' due to the constant rebranding, packaging and porting to different platforms throughout the years. What we can term the 'nostalgia for the pixel' resonates through much of mainstream symbols for 1980s gaming with many of these being dominant American and Japanese paradigms. These American and Japanese perspectives, so often discussed after the infamous 'videogame crash' prior to the release of the Nintendo Famicon (or Nintendo Entertainment System) tend to be the focus of videogame histories in popular culture (Wolf, 2012; Malliet and de Meyer, 2005). However, this is a different history to the one offered by the 1980s in Britain. As well as the console and cartridge scene of the Nintendo and Sega platforms, 1980s Britain also saw a computer game culture emerge that was embedded with writing code, with numerous programmers releasing their games on tapes, occasionally making small (and sometimes large) amounts of money in response to the demand of games for home computer systems at the time. This is a culture that developed separately to 'pre-crash' American gaming and one that is often not mentioned as frequently in global histories today.

In light of this, the early 1980s in Britain created a different type of gaming nostalgia, one so often based around the ZX Spectrum or sometimes the BBC Micro. In many ways this time created nostalgia for cassettes, floppy disks and code as well as the games displayed on the screen. This rise in the microcomputer within the late 1970s and early 1980s allowed for more people to have access to cheaper computers within schools and the home. These developments paved the way for a range of people learning to program as without basic programming skills nothing would happen. These machines weren't a case of 'plug and play', but more a case of 'type and play' and it was through interacting with the system in this way that the possibilities of game creation became more and more possible as well as an obvious means of software generation. However, it is not until we start to trace these histories, and understand the role of the platform in the creation of particular games that some of the reasons for success (and failure) start to become clear.

Elite now stands as a fundamental game within British gaming history. It is one of many 'firsts' offered up in discussions of game histories; as well as being discussed as the 'first open-ended game' and the 'first space-trading game', *Elite* was also known for its creation of three-dimensional graphics in a way that differed to other titles on

offer at the time. Although it can be seen that as with many other firsts these design decisions were happening elsewhere on other platforms in the 1980s due to the nature of the separated games industries across the globe, not everyone knew of each others developments, or these simultaneous 'firsts'. As Paul Atkinson (2010, p. 13) notes in his discussions of the first computers, "It has to be accepted, therefore, that for such complex technological products there is no relevant, single 'first' -- rather, there is a series of related innovations, taking place in different locations, often at very similar times, each having a claim to having pushed the development of computing forward in one of a number of ways". It is possible to see the development of *Elite* in a similar light.

Media archaeology and the platform

In their writing about the material object as a growing area of concern and research within game studies, Apperley and Jayemane (2012) recognize the role of the platform, and the growing area of platform studies in particular, as a move towards understanding the materiality of games in relation to the machines we play on. In doing so, both Apperley and Jaymane (2012) provide links between platform studies and media archaeology as related methodological fields, a link that has also been made previously by Parikka (2012) in his work on media archaeology (2012). Both approaches allow for the platform to be placed at the heart of the discussion by examining the layers of cultural and historical reference as well as further insights into the platform's reception, delivery and constraints at the time. In these instances the archive can play a vital role in these connections allowing for an examination of other related media as linked to the platform, such as magazine articles, reviews of software and player commentary. It is by tracing platforms that platform specific articles can also be found. The role of the archive beyond the material object of the machine allows media archaeology to pave the way for connecting series of events, whilst retaining the essence of what the platform once provided. As Ernst (2013) states, "Rather than being a nostalgic collection of 'dead media' of the past, assembled in a curiosity cabinet, media archaeology is an analytical tool, a method of analysing and presenting aspects of media that would otherwise escape the discourse of cultural history." The archive of related texts associated with the platform can be found in magazine articles and user comments. These texts help to inform more common ideologies of the reception of *Elite* on the BBC Micro, as well as the reality of alternative points of view allowing for 'other' histories of the game's initial reception to be exposed.

This is also true of platform studies as a related discipline in its own right. By examining the specific platforms, authors within the current book series are going beyond their own and others' nostalgia for the material object and the positive reception each technology might have received.[3]As Apperley and Jayemane (2012) note, "Montfort and Bogost's (2009) project is entirely focused on thinking through the relation between the computer and cultural layers by examining how the material computational limits of the platform shape and influence design decisions and consequently player experience." This approach has already been applied to the Atari VCS through the initial work of Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (2009), as well subsequent books released about the Nintendo Wii (Jones and Thiruvathuka, 2012) and the Commodore Amiga (Maher, 2012) as part of the developing platform studies series. Each title seeks to show how the platform gave rise to certain experiences shaped by the underlying hardware and resultant software capabilities in each instance. It is for this reason that the BBC Micro as a platform needs further examination beyond its role within histories of British computing and games culture, but also as a machine that could be pushed seemingly beyond its own boundaries in order to try and create something new for the time.

Not only do the platform and subsequent software serve as material objects to be preserved, they also highlight processes that are of importance to the history of digital games. Comparably the user responses found in related magazine archives act as further pieces of the overall puzzle of the platform or software's reception and as a way

of navigating and presenting these histories beyond the mainstream press. The role of the platform is fundamental in how early digital games were created as it is via the platform that the restrictions, limitations and creativity of any output are defined. However, the platform can so often be lost, or discarded, when particular games or pieces of software are discussed. This is often true of the computer game *Elite,* in that it is not always traced back to the original platform especially as it wasn't instantly globally popular at the time. A search on ebay.com on the 9th April 2013 lists two versions of the *Elite* computer game for the Apple II machine. The same search on the same day on ebay.co.uk (the British version of the site) shows approximately 100 listings for versions of the game on the BBC Micro, and the Commodore Amiga (with the Apple II version being from a seller in the United States).[4] This shows the disparity of different versions of the software depending on the country of origin, with the BBC Micro being a primarily British machine. These variations in copies of the game can also mean the game is often accredited to Firebird as the publisher and not to Acornsoft who were the first publisher to release the game.[5] The recognition of Acornsoft as the first publisher of *Elite* also starts to unfold its true origins on the BBC Micro as an Acorn Computers manufactured machine. It is only by examining the histories related to the original game and the limitations bought about by developing the game on the BBC Micro that *Elite* can be discussed in the first instance, before the possibilities of porting to other systems could even be conceived.

The BBC Micro as a platform

In January 1982, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation[6]) launched its Computer Literacy Project, with the aim "to introduce interested adults to the world of computers and computing, and to provide the opportunity for viewers to learn through direct experience how to program and use a microcomputer."[7]It was around this time that the British government started to think about their role in raising awareness of computer literacy to the general public after a series of scaremongering television programmes were aired about microcomputers taking over the workplace.[8]Prior to launching the project the BBC asked several computer companies to bid for a dedicated microcomputer to take pride of place throughout the campaign, including Sinclair Research who already had a foothold in the computer market. However, the computing platform had to meet certain requirements by the BBC in terms of its components and design. These included:

> A Basic high-level language, since Basic is easily understood by the beginner while allowing sophisticated techniques to be used. The Basic was to be as compatible as possible with existing Basics.
>
> A full keyboard, to include an additional row of keys capable of producing any code under software control.
>
> Medium-resolution colour graphics with good software support.
>
> A low price for the basic microcomputer, with the capability for expansion to a more powerful and flexible system. (Moir, 1982)

By winning the bid to the BBC based on the above requirements the BBC Micro as a computer was born. Originally called the Acorn Proton (after their first computer the Acorn Atom), the machine became rebranded and known to all as the BBC Micro, through its inclusion in subsequent television and radio shows linked to the Computer Literacy Project.

Although the computer is so often remembered as an educational platform the BBC Micro was also a game creation machine. It was this accessibility within the education system that made the computer a prime candidate for game development with users of the Micro creating their own leisure-based games in parallel with a wave of educational games developed for use in schools. Similarly, it was through this exploration of the BBC Micro as a potential site for game

creation that the bond between David Braben and Ian Bell was formed. A chance meeting at Cambridge University led the duo to create *Elite*. Prior to coming to Cambridge to study mathematics, Ian Bell had already released a successful game by the name of *Free Fall* in 1982.[9] Although not an arcade-game, Free Fall was based around some common arcade mechanics, inherent in games designed during this time, often based around one screen of action. The player's goal was to reach a new hi-score, and stay in the game as long as possible without losing lives. However, David Braben wasn't interested in arcade style games or the commonly found ports available on the BBC Micro. He wanted a longer game experience, the chance for players to explore larger worlds and not just gain points from shooting or collecting things. It was this drive that led to the creation of *Elite*. Subsequently, much of what was designed for *Elite* was as a response to what the BBC Micro could or couldn't do. The Micro only had certain capabilities, so although Braben and Bell had grand plans they had to find ways of being to implement them.

Elite as the 'first'

"Even now, just a week after its launch, Elite has already firmly established itself as a cult game for the Beeb that seems to create its own self perpetuating fame." (Fell, 1984)

By understanding the media archaeology of more common, or dominant, game histories we can examine game content and processes in terms of what Huhtamo terms as "topoi". As Huhtamo (2011, p. 28) notes, "Cultural desires are expressed by being embedded them within topoi. Functioning as shells or vessels derived from the memory banks of tradition, topoi mold the meaning(s) of cultural objects." In this sense it could be seen that the rules, space and outcomes of particular games such as *Pac-Man* act as 'shells' for understanding the basis of the particular game. Each time the game is repackaged and re-sold on different platforms as technologies progress the same initial topoi exists, although the layers of interaction (via different or new inputs devices) and improved graphics or a different output device change each time.

In many ways following the 'topoi' through multiple game franchises, and even unrelated games can start to reveal similar patterns of game creation, innovation and display. Games often labelled as 'firsts' may not be when examined through finding related topoi in comparable aspects as games released at a similar time. However, what is new, and what can be seen as a 'first' is the way the platform the game has been created on allows for this statement to be true. The restrictions of the technology, memory, processors, machine code, languages, software and even audiences lead to firsts for that particular machine. It is in recognizing these firsts that we can start to see the importance of the platform in the creation of *Elite*.

One of the many firsts of gaming that often surrounds *Elite* throughout gaming histories is the notion of the 'first three-dimensional game'. As Andrew Hutchison discusses in his history of Myst and Doom, "In the same way that Cyan had plenty of previous experience to prepare them for producing *Myst*, id Software had released *Hovertank 3D* in 1991 with the claim that it was the first ever personal computer game with 3D elements (id Software, 2005). This claim has been contested, and the game *Elite* (Braben Bell,1984) has been presented as an earlier example (Wikipedia, 2005)" (Hutchison, A, 2008). However, even before this declaration by an editor of Wikipedia, the discussion of the first three-dimensional game can be traced back to *Battlezone* in 1980 and *3D Monster Maze* in 1981 (Edge Online, 2006). Whereas *3D Monster Maze* (programmed for the Sinclair ZX81) was constructed of raster graphics, Battlezone was designed using vector graphics, something else realized by Braben and Bell in making *Elite*. In fact in an interview with a BBC news correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones, the interviewer states that *Elite* was 3D in "a way that had never been seen before" with Braben responding that he felt it was the "first true 3D game using wireframe graphics" (BBC News Online, 2012). Although 3D graphics had been experimented with and commercialized before the creation of Elite, the 3D graphics of the game utilized a different approach, thus

warranting the label of the 'first' once again.

As well as being constructed as a three-dimensional game, *Elite* is also commonly described as a space-trading game. The three-dimensional graphics are fundamental to its design as the purpose was to make the player feel as though they could traverse an expansive world (see Figure 1). The game centres on the player and the Cobra Mark III spaceship they use in order to find different stars and trade goods in the hope of gaining the exclusive 'Elite' rating. However, other spacecraft and traders, as well as police Vipers, are also present within the gameworld to stop the player as a combateer succeeding in their missions.

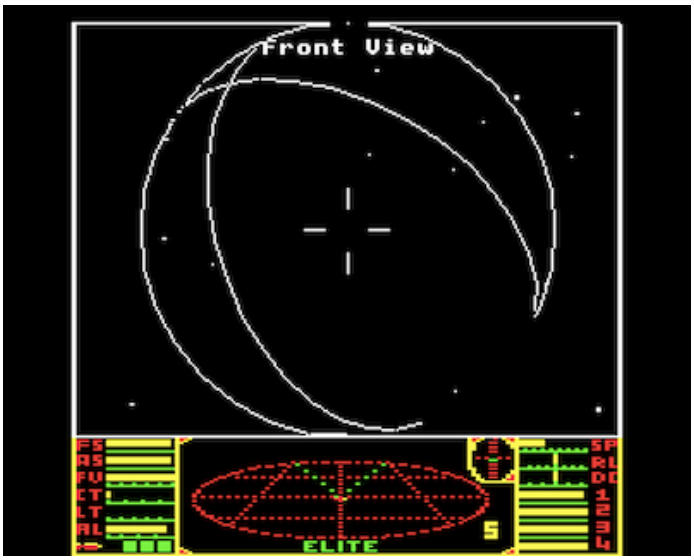

Figure 1. Front view of the gameworld in Elite (Braben and Bell, 1984)

In order to develop the game's three-dimensional graphics and create a sense of explorable space, Braben and Bell had to fully consider how to use the BBC Micro to its full advantage. The first hurdle that Braben and Bell came up against in designing the game for was the limited memory available to them as the BBC Micro only had 32k. Anderson and Levene (2012, p. 115) note, "The image used on screen took up a vast chunk of [the memory allocation]; a third, or two thirds for really high-resolution two-colour mode, which immediately bumped their available memory down to 22 kilobytes." The constraints on memory presented a challenge to Braben and Bell about how they could represent space with multiple galaxies and yet still retain a playable game within restrictions imposed by the machine. Although the BBC Micro allowed for ROM expansions, these were usually used for software such as extra font types for word-processor packages that needed extra memory. Expanding the machine is this way was not a preferred option for the gaming market due to the cost of the additional external ROM needed. However, by using different techniques that pushed the boundaries of using the platform, Bell and Braben managed to develop a game that incorporated eight galaxies for players to explore, along with hundreds of stars. The implications of this were huge in the 1980s in the UK, leading to the creation of what is commonly termed to be the first 'open-world' or 'open-ended' game, the price at which came with negotiated experimentation with the system.

The first layer to be stripped away in using the machine was to program the game solely with assembly language directly accessing the 6502 processor, and not the BBC BASIC programming language that was predominately advertised as being the way for new users to learn how to program on the machine. For most users, BASIC was the interface between the user and the machine, allowing people to type in simple commands, load games or software, and create simple games, shapes and animations. However, running BASIC took up much needed memory allocations as a layer of additional processes was constantly running on the machine. By using assembly language, as utilized by many other BBC Micro games, Braben and Bell were able to gain more memory and therefore more freedom to include

further events, namely how the three-dimensional world would be generated and displayed to the player. In her paper about early microusers and game creation in the 1980s Swalwell (2012) highlights the notion of users "will to mod". Although there were books, magazines and television series devoted to how to use the BBC Micro and create small programs for the machine these basic skills were the starting point of many people. To get deep into creating larger, more sophisticated games, users had to develop their own learning away from these basic skills and continue to 'mod' or 'hack' away at learning to program more and more assembly language until they achieved their desired output.[10]

These hacking, or creative programming techniques, are subsequently referred to as 'silver bullets' by Braben in his GDC post-mortem of the game.[11] Another one of these silver bullets was to use the onscreen display to its full capacity, a feat which was subsequently accomplished in two ways. In the first instance Braben developed a memory saving technique of using the exact 256 by 256 boundary that the 8-bit system allowed in order to create his own line drawing algorithm. This freed up extra memory in order for the graphics to be displayed as and when they were required rather than being drawn time and time again in order to display the right lines. This also meant that only the lines needed were displayed, again freeing up space to perform other functions, and giving the illusion of a greater sense of three-dimensionality through using hidden line removal.

In light of this the second silver bullet linked to the creative response to manipulating the screen's display by showing innovation in using the platform, was by the programmers playing with the black and white and colour aspects of how the graphics were shown. Braben designed a method of changing the graphics from being in black and white on the top two-thirds of the screen moving towards colour graphics in the bottom third (this is shown in Figure 1). This technique was unheard of in the BBC development team at the time. As Sophie Wilson, one of the key members of the BBC development team notes "Elite is the program that couldn't have been written"; a point echoed by Steve Furber who agreed "What David Braben managed to do with a computer with no memory and no computer power -- Elite had the BBC design team staggered. It was one of the most outstanding games" (Andersen and Levene, 2012, p. 116-117). What were seen to many as technological limitations had been seemingly broken by Braben and Bell who were determined to see through their extensive design decisions for the game, only to see them slowly come to life.

The resultant 3D graphics of *Elite* allowed for what felt to players like an expansive universe, traversing the seemingly limitless possibilities of space (see Figure 2), something noted in the original advertising for the game. Documenting in a BeeBug magazine review in 1984 the article notes, "Acornsoft Elite is the first in a new generation of 3-D space games featuring interstellar travel in a distant cluster of galaxies..." (Fell, 1984). It was this innovation that also saw *Elite* take a step further in terms of design, compared to *Battlezone*. The movement in *Elite* was seen to be more versatile allowing the player to speed up and slow down the spaceship thus creating a range of motion and endless possibilities. In playing the game "… space combat was more fluid and free form, and excitingly mimicked the dogfights seen in the *Star Wars* films" (Andersen and Levene, 2012, p. 109). *Battlezone* can in many ways be seen as the first three-dimensional game, appearing a few years before *Elite*. However, *Elite* was seen as an extension from this as the 'first three-dimensional' space game, before being discussed as an 'open world' or 'open ended' game, and also 'space-trading game' or even an RPG.[12]

Figure 2. Galactic Chart 1. *Elite* (Braben and Bell, 1984)

The nature of gaming in the 1980s in Britain meant that the creation of firsts in some of these instances would have felt to be the case to Braben and Bell at the time. As Tristan Donovan (2010, p. 120) notes "The idea of a being a space-age trucker had already been explored in a few trading games, such as 1974's Star Traders - a text game for mainframe computers - and 1980's Galactic Trader on the Apple II, but neither Bell or Braben knew of their existence." What was happening in America was only known if it was documented in one of the many computing and platform specific magazines available. Similarly, many home users did not have access to machines such as the Apple II as it was completely out of the reach of the average British household. Therefore, it is possible to trace the 'topoi' or the connections between genres such as 'space-trading' games in hindsight, but at the time, these connections were relatively unknown. Braben, himself, only had access to his own personally modified Acorn Atom (the predecessor of the Micro) as he was unable to afford an actual BBC Micro at the time. The BBC Micro sold for around £395, which in the 1980s in the UK was a significant investment for someone purchasing the machine. Therefore, games such as *Star Traders* or *Galactic Trader* would not have been accessible at university or amongst his friends and colleagues, and therefore, relatively unknown.

Once again, the notion of firsts within game history starts to become skewed and harder to define as further examinations beyond the mainstream press and more common histories reveal other sides to the development of such games that are not always unique to gaming, but often unique to the specific platform of creation. Isolating a game to its production values, as well as the culture and background of the programmers at the time starts to reveal common themes. Beyond the analysis of the platform and game creation, further histories can also be provided through a lens of media archaeology, particularly alternative histories to the game's reception, and the additional commentary related to the game as found in print and online archives from its time of release. It is by recognising the BBC Micro as the first platform the game was made on/for that we can start to find player responses to *Elite* in the numerous platform specific game magazines that were sold during its popularity.

Elite and the player

> "From the start, there were no tutorials no obvious path and no helpful assistant; the player as delivered into an unforgiving universe and allowed to reach the ultimate goal of being ranked "Elite" through whatever means &emdash; moral and physical &emdash; he deemed appropriate" (Byrne, 2007, p. 104).

In *Supercade: a visual history of the videogame age* (Burnham, 2001), Elite is mentioned in the ZX Spectrum chapter despite the BBC

Micro itself not being worthy of similar column inches. *Elite* is noted as being "the standout classic of the starfield genre" (p. 293) standing alongside other native Spectrum games.[13] The game's standout qualities also mean it is found in lists such as IGN's (2000) 'Top 25 PC games of All Time'.[14] In this listing the game is described as being published by Firebird and released in 1987. Although these facts are true of the PC version of the game listings such as these once again detract from recognising the original platform. Similarly, although Elite is the first game to be listed in the 'Notable BBC Games' section of *High Score!: the illustrated history of electronic games* the accompanying text in *High Score!* also notes the success of the game in America (Demaria and Wilson, 2004, p.342). This once again can be seen as a way of confirming the importance of the US market in supplying common and more dominant histories of games dependant on consumer sales. The repetition of titles plays on mainstream memories, of commonly played lists, and therefore stays within the popular press and coffee table titles. Much like the mask that nostalgia can provide in researching the histories of game titles, the porting of games to other platforms can also mean that further research can potentially be hindered by the lack of understanding as to where to search for material related to the first release of the game.

Examining the archives of letters pages from BBC Micro focused magazines sold at the time that *Elite* was being played in the 1980s reveals other stories about the game's initial reception. Far from being a big hit with every player, a game that must be played, the title caused frustration for groups of players due to its new styles of game play. As Kirkpatrick (2012) has noted in his previous examination of British gaming magazines in the 1980s, "by studying them we can gain perspective on gaming culture in its nascent phase; its period of formation." Whilst it is easy to draw relationships between games, such as the links to *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003) as a possible development from *Elite*, the initial reception of the game from a player perspective shows the reality of how *Elite* was not always seen by all as ground-breaking, innovative or a welcomed break from the stability of arcade-style games at the time. These other, alternative, histories become important as ways of recognizing both sides of the histories of games. Alongside recognising the original platform as a site of game creation, the associated reception of the game adds another layer of history to our understanding of the cultural impact of these games in the wider context.

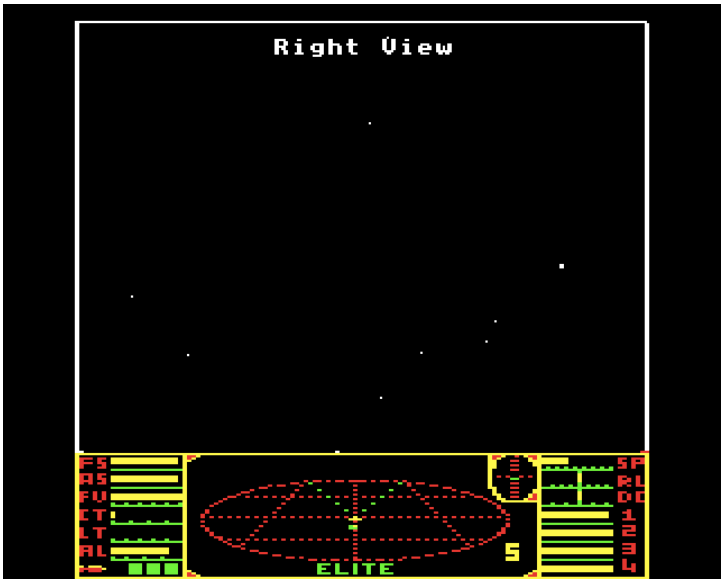

Figure 3. Left and Right views in Elite (Braben and Bell, 1984)

Elite was a different gaming experience for players in many ways. As previously discussed, Braben, in particular, did not want to recreate the more commonly found arcade type experiences that were currently on the market at the time. In the first instance, *Elite* changed the viewpoint for the player in terms of how the three-dimensional aspect of the game could be explored. The player was now able to switch between front, side and behind views in order to explore the universe as the spaceship is moving through the galaxies (see Figure 2). In doing so, these spaces allowed for "z-axis movement into and out of the frame" (Wolf, 2001, p. 63) showing passing planets and spaceships from different angles, rather than fixing the viewpoint all within one screen or perspective. Not only does this make the universe appear to be more expansive, it also shifts the user's perspective. Allowing for a shift in the viewpoint helped with the open-ended nature of the gameworld, which matched up with the mapped viewed of seeing different planets to potentially land on to and trade items from. This was one of the key points about *Elite*. It was not a point-collecting game that could be played repetitively in short bursts. *Elite* was time-consuming. It involved exploration, 'levelling-up' your ship and captain with various weapons and items that could be used to trade with other ships it may encounter. These items could also help players get their ships out of compromising situations in order to prolong gameplay and try not to be faced with the dreaded 'Game Over' screen. At the time Elite could be seen as an endurance test, a completely new type of game that was not experienced much in other digital game playing scenarios during the 1980s.

In the January 1985 edition of *The Micro User* magazine, two readers letters were published outlining their angst and frustration at playing *Elite*. The first letter from Paul R. Lemon, Aintree, Merseyside starts by stating, "As soon as I saw the adverts I bought Elite, from Acornsoft. Having been a fan of Atari's Star Raiders for years I couldn't resist." However, the next paragraph goes on to reveal how the reader is less than excited about the game since playing it, stating, "Today I am selling Elite! At 26 I'm reasonably coordinated and until now have had no problems with any computer game but Elite is beyond me. It's infuriating and potentially dangerous for computers as I've never felt more like taking an axe to the keyboard." From hereon in the reader continues to outline their reasoning behind their dislike of the game, blaming the poor quality of controls, and how although the game is graphically superior to other titles, the overall gameplay lets the game down as the combat sequences prove to be too difficult for the reader to continually overcome. This frustration is echoed by the second reader, A.M.D, Exeter, Devon, whose main complaint is the difficultly of the game from the start. This reader felt the game had a steep learning curve stating, "To get to even a friendly Corporate State planet on your first try you are

besieged by countless enemy ships which eliminate you before you can even find them, never mind identify them".

The long playing hours, open-ended possibilities and space-trading nature of *Elite* means it is often seen as being an innovative starting point in the creation of different game genres. To move from Harmless to Mostly Harmless to Poor to Average to Above Average to Competent to Dangerous to Deadly and finally Elite takes time and investment from the player, something that wasn't built in to as many digital games at the time. This resulted in failure for quite a few players, a factor recognized by Juul in his book *The Art of Failure.* As Juul (2013, p. 5) notes, "players tend to prefer games that are somewhat challenging, and for a moment it can sound as if this explains the paradox -- players like to fail, but not too much". In the case of *Elite* the game was not balanced enough for all players. This factor, combined with Elite offering a different style of gaming from point collection and quick play times, meant that not all players could adapt to the experience as easily as others. As A.M.D in the January 1985 issue of the Micro User concluded in the closing paragraphs of his letter about Elite to the magazine, "A game is only a game if it allows you a chance of winning. Continual failure is very depressing and I have quickly developed an anti-game attitude".

These two letters caused such a debate among other readers that the entire Micro Mail reader's letters section of the April 1985 issue of*The Micro User* magazine was dedicated this to ensuing conversation between different players of *Elite* who subsequently decided to write in. The ensuing comments ranged from similar voices of frustration with readers complaining about "being attacked and watching your energy decrease every second" as you are trying to save up for a docking computer to other players writing that "Elite is for the macho among us, and if you can't cope then you must resort to other tactics". By seeing these different responses to the game, it is possible to see how Elite was not a 'Top 25 Game' for all players, and its new, celebrated features were not features to be praised by all.

Further investigation into the magazine archive shows that cheat guides were later released in the January and February 1986 issues of*The Micro User* as separate pull-outs showcasing how to get the most out of the game and cheat codes that could be inputted to start with better weapons and more money by manipulating the Elite game file (on both tape or disc). Part 1 of the guide outlines key gameplaying tactics that are needed to succeed in the game with the proviso that, "We hope this guide will help you to get to Elite. But remember, the Order of Elite is a fighting quality far beyond courage, macho and cool precision. Select wisely in battle and be strong." These words are accompanied with further text at the bottom of the page with a preview of Part 2 of the guide that offers "a secret weapon to help you achieve victory". Unlike todays gaming culture where cheat guides and walkthroughs are released near on simultaneously with the games themselves, the cheat guide in *The Micro User* came nearly four years after the release of the original game. It wasn't until the popularity of the game continued to rise, that it was ported to other platforms including the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Apple II, as well as the NES console, although each release of the game was slightly different dependant on the capabilities of each platform release. It was with this popularity that more help for playing the game came about through magazines related to the platforms users were playing the game on.

Conclusions

It is by examining the BBC Micro as the platform of development for *Elite* that we can start to understand some of the histories behind the games creation. The notion of 'firsts' within game history can be debated in light of comparable events, however, by exposing the founding platform in the initial game creation, we can start to see other histories unfold. Similarly, a further examination of related media in order to find alternative histories of the game's reception also starts to open up new dialogues about a game that is so often praised as being well received and frequently listed in top game releases. While it is possible to see the innovations and praise for Elite during its development in the 1980s, it is also possible to show other

histories that add to the wider picture of games culture within the UK. The game can now be seen beyond its game playing features, and be seen as a set of processes and responses that go deeper than remembered tales that are frequently repeated as summaries of game play. In many ways too, this article can only be a snapshot of some of those histories as archives continue to grow and develop as the contents of people's lofts start to become museums and printed magazines become transformed into documents online.

Not only does the nostalgia of the game mean that the platform is often lost, but so too are some of the early memories of its reception amongst players. The *Elite:Dangerous* Kickstarter, and various emulators that we are able to download to play versions of the game allow the game to be kept alive by communities online and in the physical world. However, it is only through recognising the platform, and the archival research of alternative histories through a lens of media archaeology that we are able to see the true story of Elite and its role in British gaming histories today. According to Zielinski (1996) the goal of media archaeology is to "dig out secret paths in history, which might help us find our way into the future". In many ways that future for *Elite* is the Kickstarter as mentioned at the beginning of this article, but in terms of the histories of games in particular, the future is still in retracing parts of the past through platforms, players, archives and across continents in order to gain a variety of perspectives on this continually growing cultural phenomenon.

Notes

[1] Elite: Dangerous Kickstarter,http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1461411552/elite-dangerous [last accessed 16 August 2013]

2 The notion of 'spreadability' in relation to 1980s computer game culture is discussed by Bob Rehak in his essay 'The Value of Retrogames' available at the Spreadable Media website: http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/rehak/#.UX1py0TqK1s [last accessed 16 August 2013]

3 This is noted by Jose P. Zagal (2011) in his review of Racing the Beam (Montfort and Bogost, 2009) commenting, "*RtB* is an accessible nostalgia-free in-depth examination of a broadly recognized and fondly remembered icon of the videogame revolution."

4 The keyword 'Elite' was searched on Ebay.com and Ebay.co.uk under the vintage computing section.

5 Firebird published subsequent versions of Elite, but the first BBC Micro version of the game was released through Acornsoft who gave Braben and Bell a £1000 advance for the title.

6 The British Broadcasting Corporation is a commercial free television station in the UK, funded by the public in the form of a license fee when owning a television set. The Corporation's mission is "to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain"; a mission that is still upheld today. For more about the BBC see: http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/whoweare/mission_and_values/ [last accessed 16 August 2013]

7 For further information about the Computer Literacy Project see: http://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/7182/BBC-Computer-Literacy-Project/ [last accessed 16 August 2013]

8 Prior to the Computer Literacy Project starting, British audiences had been informed about the rise of micro computers through the ITV series 'The Mighty Micro', and a BBC Horizon programme titled 'Now the Chips are Down', both aired in the late 1970s.

9 On his website, Ian Bell defines *Free Fall* as the first beat-em-up, jokingly citing that he invented two gaming genre. Seehttp://www.iancgbell.clara.net/freefall/index.htm [last accessed 16 August 2013]

10 Steven Levy (2010) traces the origins of the term 'hack' and subsequently 'hacker' to some of the pranks played by MIT students

pre-mainstream computing and how the term was used with pride and recognition. "…it was be understood that, to quality as a hack, the feat must be imbued with innovation, style , and technical virtuosity" (Levy, 2010,p. 10)

11 David Braben's GDC 2011 Elite Post-Mortem can be found in the GDC Vault online:http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1014628/

[12] As noted by Steven Poole (2000, p.55), "One of the most revolutionary home-computer games of the 1980s, Elite, is usually thought of as an early 3D space game. But it is just as much an RPG too, in that success depends on carving out a career, over a period of several real-world weeks or months, as an intergalactic trader in minerals or narcotics"

[13] Elite was released on the ZX Spectrum in 1985, published by Firebird.

14. The IGN Top 25 PC games of All Time' was published online in July 2000 and can be found here:http://uk.ign.com/articles/2000/07/24/the-top-25-pc-games-of-all-time [last accessed 16 August 2013]

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