Demoscene: 30 years of creative programming

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Demoscene?

- A technologically and creatively oriented community
  - A subculture? Hackers? Hobbyists?
- Started already in the early 1980s
- Main artifact: *demos*, real-time audiovisual presentations (and a lot more)

Whoami

- Demo research since 2004
  - Demoscene Research with Antti Silvast
  - Articles, WiderScreen thematic issue
- One of them, too. Mostly as a *coder* and a *graphician* (1991–)
  - Very common among other researchers as well

Where are demos made?

- Largely a European phenomenon, esp. (West) Germany and the Nordic Countries

- East Europe and Russia long behind the iron curtain, more activity after that

- Scarce elsewhere

    – Why? Hackers, otakus, technical reasons

"A typical scener"

- Heavily male-dominant hobby
  - As they've tended to be in general
- Originally teenagers and youngster
  - Later on, growing old – not necessarily a youth culture anymore
  - … and little rotation

Demogroups

- Demos are mostly made by groups
    - 3–5 people participate actively
    - Big and international groups, too

- Names such as: Scoopex, The Physical Crew, Booze Design

- And the Members have *handles*: Dr. Acid, Slayer, Marq
    - Notation: Broti/Digital Talk ("of")

Roles

- You need at least a:
    - Programmer (coder)
    - Musician
    - Graphician
    - In essence, quite standard roles
- Other duties, too:
    - Leader, organizer, swapper, SysOp, hangaround, mascot etc.

Parties

- An important part of the culture
  - Started as *copyparties*
  - Networking, competitions, getting wasted
  - Typically yearly events (these days)
- Assembly, Revision, The Gathering, Alternative Party (The Party, Breakpoint)
- Party photos: http://www.slengpung.com/

Parties (2)

Not only demos

- Sceners produce a lot more
    - Images
    - Music
    - Videos
    - Disk magazines, *diskmags* (esp. 1990s)
    - These days also some games
    - Not all productions are digital

Diskmags

- Scene journalism: R.A.W. #6

Party props

A chronology

- Next let's look at some productions from the last 30 years

- There are already more than >100 000, so we can only scratch the surface

- For various platforms, so we'll stick to videos and emulators

Apple II

- Apple's second computer, 1977

Crack screens

- http://artscene.textfiles.com/intros/APPLEII/

Commodore 64

- World's most sold home computer, 1983

Crack intros

- Greetings and info screens at the beginning of cracked games

Crack intros (2)

- Bragging and contacts important
- Ingenious *effect* programming
- The same intro reused multiple times

Towards demos

- Right from the beginning intros often made by someone else than the cracker

- Around 1990 an increasing divide
    - Legislation, different user generation, the decline of the C-64
    - *Swappers* linked the two trades (pirates and demosceners) for long

Megademos

- Multiple screen collections
- Initially "interactive" (press space)
- In the early 1990s the continuous *trackmo* style

Commodore Amiga (1985)

- Amiga 500 (1987) was popular here, too

Red Sector Megademo (1989)

Peak Amiga

- Amiga-demos emerged already in the mid-1980s

    - A notable competitor was the audiovisually poorer Atari ST (1984)

- Increasing self-awareness, better sound and graphics capabilities

- Commodore bankruptcy in 1994

PC generations

- IBM PC, 1981

PC generations (2)

- A huge change in 34 years

- Initially poor sound and graphics capabilities

- Started improving towards the 1990s

    - SoundBlaster, Gravis UltraSound, VGA cards, CPU power

- Finally in the late 1990s affordable 3D accelerators

Inside by CNCD (1996)

Other platforms

- 1980s home computers
  - Sinclair ZX Spectrum, Atari ST, MSX, Amstrad CPC, Oric …
- Game consoles
- Mobile phones, PDAs
- Macintosh, Atari Falcon, Linux
- Browsers: Flash, JavaScript

Suicide Barbie by TBL (2007)

Living fossils

- Old demo machines don't necessarily disappear
    - Nostalgia
    - Community
    - "Squeezing the last cycle out" ethics
- Especially the C-64 scene is still active
    - Even here a demoparty in 2015, *Zoo*

Sceners now

- Many work in various fields of new media
    - Programmers, designers, musicians, researchers, IT specialists
- A pre-school for the game industry?
- You learn useful skills, but...
    - A too easy narrative, incorporation, byproduct

The future of the scene?

- The community is still alive and productive, parties are held frequently
    - Large parties have turned game-centric
- Little rotation of members
- Certain decline in activity
    - Bent Stamnes's statistics:
      http://blog.subsquare.com/page/2/

Preservation challenges

- Machines and storage media don't last forever
  - Archives
  - Emulation
  - Videos: YouTube etc.
  - Migration, re-creation: rare
- Similar questions as in software, game and new media art preservation

Readings

- Tamas Polgar (2005): Freax: The Brief History of the Demoscene

- Anders Carlsson (2009): The Forgotten Pioneers of Creative Hacking and Social Networking

- Markku Reunanen (2010): Computer Demos – What Makes Them Tick?

Readings (2)

- Markku Reunanen (2017): Times of Change in the Demoscene
- Daniel Botz (2011): Kunst, Code und Maschine
- Patryk Wasiak (2012): 'Illegal Guys'
- WiderScreen thematic issue (1–2/2014)
  - http://www.widerscreen.fi/

Links

- Pouet.net: http://www.pouet.net/

- CSDb: http://www.csdb.dk/

- Demozoo: http://www.demozoo.org/

- Scene.org: http://www.scene.org/

- Party pics: http://www.slengpung.com/

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demoscene

Thx!

Questions?