

# Playfulness as a Key Factor to the Spread of Computer Technology in Spain (1980s)

Ignasi Meda Calvet

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

1982 was an important year for the history of computing in Europe. Clive Sinclair released 'ZX Spectrum', the predecessor of ZX80 and ZX81 models, under great popular expectation. This micro became the best-selling computer in Europe [w1] and, above all, turned out to be the basic tool for many people to start using and programming computers [2]. In this sense, Spain was no exception at all, although it would take at least one extra year for the ZX Spectrum to become popular there. Despite this, ZX Spectrum helped the arrival of home computers in Spanish households and brought, above all, the possibility for many people to tinker with and theorize over all microprocessor issues, otherwise inaccessible at that time [4].

It is important to remark that, initially, Sinclair wished to sell a machine for educational purposes [4, p. 309], and that is why Sinclair's home computers ran with 'BASIC' programming language [w1], to make it the easiest to use. One of its most distinctive characteristics, besides its capacity for displaying colours on TV screens whenever these were not black-and-white, was that it enabled programmers to introduce instructions into their home computer through associated computer keys, instead of programming key by key, as it was till then with other computers.

Essentially, the low prices and technological convenience of Sinclair's devices, as compared to other micros, would end up creating

a new set of technologic necessities which were related to a big question that characterized home computers in Spain as consumption goods during the 80s: *what exactly can they be used for?*. Those who could answer such a question, would definitely dictate what necessities home computers could meet and whom for. Consequently, 'software' became a valued electronic commodity, essential, on the one hand, for the manufacturers to sell their electronic computers and, on the other hand, for users and home computer buyers willing to begin to use or maximize the use of their micros at home.

*'Software is also what defines our relationship to the computer. It is what we experience when we interact with the machine [...]. We might not know what kind of computer we are using or who manufactured it, but we definitely know what software we are currently running.'* [1, p. 761]

Therefore, it was clear that home computers had the flexibility to be programmed via software to serve an almost infinite number of purposes. This made the electronic digital computer such a powerful and compelling technology [1]. Notwithstanding this, Leslie Haddon claims for example that in the early 80s, in the UK (and I argue that such thing occurred in Spain as well), there was a momentous appropriation of home computers by youngsters.

*'Within a few years, teenagers who had received the early computers as gifts provided a further source of games programmers. Although this software industry was relatively small, the national press carried stories of successful entrepreneurial schoolboys and this fuelled further interest.'* [3, p. 13]

Despite the early manufacturers' wishes, ZX Spectrum and other home computers such as Amstrad CPC or Commodore 64, began to be used for other purposes in Spain, mostly for entertainment uses. In this respect, Rafael Gómez argues that this might have happened because software with educational purposes was not, indeed, abundant [2, p. 311]. However, as he also points out, ZX Spectrum became one of the most notorious entertainment platforms in the middle eighties which in turn enabled the circulation of related literature, particularly specialized publications that were selected mostly by Spanish teenagers to start learning computer programming. Driven by curiosity, soon these young hobbyists put into practice what they had learnt while tinkering with their computers at home and, as a result, early simple video games took place and this, in turn, would also be the mainstays for the more complex video games to appear.

Besides some users did, in fact, apply the most basic early machines to 'productive'

tasks such as word processing or manage the household accounts, the dominant use of the machines proved ultimately to be video gaming among male adolescents [5]. Furthermore, videogames were a key factor that contributed to the spread and diffusion of the early home computers in Spain, as well as in other European countries. At a time when the micros were presented for the industry and manufacturers as the newest and revolutionary tools ready to be used by all family members and for multiple purposes, in reality they were particularly used by the youngest practitioners as entertainment devices.

By way of conclusion, I defend that the spread of videogames in the eighties as well as the arrival of the early home computers are interwoven processes that cannot be fully understood separately. This in turn gives way to analyze videogames from a different frame than the traditional game studies focused mostly on identifying novelty and significance, such as the recollection of the emergence of games and technologic devices to play with. Therefore, by taking into consideration both, playfulness and the arrival of computers into the households, we will have to consider the valuable contributions of other very different actors, such as politicians, programmers, designers, hobbyists, gamers and fan communities – including also their everyday practices – in their respective local contexts.

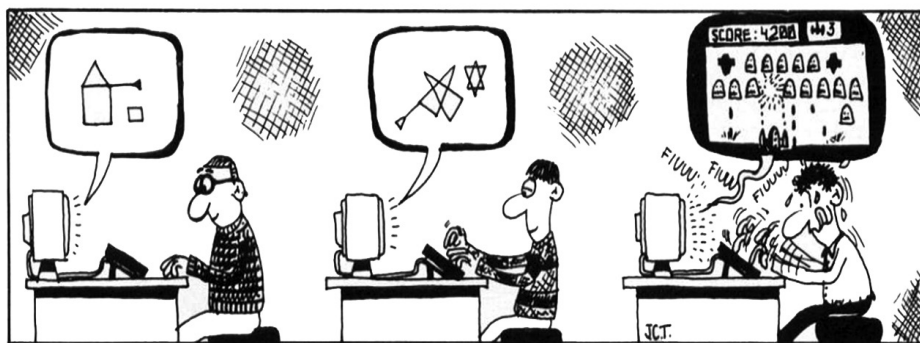


Figure 1: 'TodoSpectrum' magazine, May 1985, p. 13.

## Web Sites

[w1] 'Basic'. *Wikipedia*. Accessed 29 July 2014 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BASIC>

[w2] 'ZX Spectrum'. *Wikipedia*. Accessed 29 July 2014 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ZX\\_Spectrum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ZX_Spectrum)

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