# Format(ive) Wars:

# Formation of the British Videogames Industry in the 1980s

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## ABSTRACT

'Format', 'platform' or 'console' wars are a defining characteristic of the development of a discourse of generational linear-chronology among videogame technologies. The UK is typified as the 'rarefied home of the format wars' (Wade 2007: 682), with the buoyancy of its contemporary development scene often attributed to the battles between the Commodore and Spectrum machines which were fought in the bedrooms, playgrounds and classrooms of the mid-1980s. The primacy of a format wars ideology was compounded with the early-1990s US face-off between Sega and Nintendo, which devolved into a litigious and acrimonious exchange, which arguably lead to the decline of both companies when Sony entered the marketplace in 1994.

It is widely understood that format wars are both highly representative of and prevalent in post-industrial societies, where vying for market dominance is an indicator of the information age (Shapiro and Varian 1999: 8). Videogame technologies are a key signifier of this transition with their immutable reliance on technological upgrades, restrictive practices in use and publication and built-in obsolescence. Yet the linear-generational model so favoured by videogame commentators has been extensively challenged by scholars from inside and outside the US including Guins (2014) and Newman (2012) as they are tied to a model which privileges tech-fetishism and unhelpful linear-chronological metaphors.

Many of these recent methodological revisions to the format wars model foreground discourse analysis of videogame magazines (e.g. *Zzap!* and *Crash*) as the key proponent for the sociocultural formation of the industry (see especially Kirkpatrick 2015, also Therrien and Picard 2015). Whilst these are useful approaches, their narrow focus fails to acknowledge other, vitally important influences on the videogames industry in 1980s Britain. Therefore, with these revisions and caveats to the fore, this paper challenges the current research on the formation of the videogames industry in the 1980s. With strategic management literature aligning the end-user, or consumer, as the most important focus of emergent technological industries, all those involved in videogames' formation are viewed as an end users, a position contingent on their intrinsic relationships with one another. These relationships can be seen as battles, wars, or fights, but there are nuanced

and subtle dimensions which were tied to business and media strategies, which were originally employed in the industry and set the paradigm for present day marketing and PR. These include the use of the 'chain of approval' between gamers, high street stores, publishers, software houses and developers; the role of the publisher as the 'Artist and Repertoire' agent for developers; teasing tantalising technology ('vapourware') such as the Spectrum QL; touched up promotional photographs of games and hardware ('bullshots') and the PR branding of star individuals such as Alan Sugar and Robert Maxwell.

The relationships forged in these formative years between developers, publishers, distributors, marketing consultants, captains of industry and journalists, are comprehensively explored in this paper through recourse to primary interview data with developers and publishers who worked in the 1980s and the ample literature of the time (e.g. Dale 1985; Adamson and Kennedy 1986).   This enables critique of the nodes of affiliation between Sinclair (the man, the myth, the machine and the company), Sensible Software's Jon Hare, Hewson Consultants' Andrew Hewson, Robert Maxwell's Mirrorsoft, high street chain stores and the magazines of Newsfield Publications, all of which are linked through a whorl of capital and consumption, repetition and innovation.

## Keywords
1980s Videogames; UK videogames industry; format wars; development; publishing; Sinclair Spectrum; Commodore 64

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