PC Gaming: Crash Course Games #20

Crash Course: Games
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Hi I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games.

Today we're going to take a brief look at the world of PC gaming. That's right PC master race, we've got you covered. Because computers did start the video game age, after all. They were the precursor of the console, hand-held systems, and all other technological gaming genres. But just because PC games led to all the other types of video games doesn't mean they're antiquated.

PC gamers prefer playing on their computers because they provide a gaming landscape where players, designers, and developers intermingle. Players can alter and modify their systems and games to their tastes, and unlike on consoles, designers and developers craft games untethered to a single machine. And this world of PC gaming is so diverse and imaginative that you might find games like Meat Boy, 7th Guest, and Rollercoaster Tycoon all on the same computer. And Minesweeper. Don't forget Minesweeper.

PC gaming continues to be a powerhouse and the foundation for all modern video games. So, let's take a look at how they got their start and where they are going in the future.

[Theme Music]

So pretty much as soon as computers appeared after World War Two people started making games to play on them. But you've seen those early computer pictures, they were huge. It wasn't until the microprocessor was developed in the 1960s and 70s, when computers morphed from room-size behemoths to the desktop and eventually to the hand-held ones we know today.

In 1974, M.I.T.S, or the Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems Company, introduced the Altair 8800, a build-it-yourself computer kit. It didn't have a keyboard or a screen, but it did give feedback through a row of lights that flashed back at people. This is considered the first commercially successful PC.

But home computers didn't grab the public's gaming imagination at first. It was the advent of arcade machines that did it. Games like Pong, Gun Fight, and Lunar Lander fueled arcades all over the world due to their ease of play and availability. This is turn led to home consoles like the Odyssey, Atari, and ColecoVision, which we talked about earlier in the series. At the same time, PCs were evolving at an amazing rate.

Computer gaming continued to grow, and by the late 1970s, video games began to split into two different, though intrinsically linked, lines. On one side you has the dedicated gaming consoles that eventually led to Nintendo, Sega, Xbox, and PlayStation. On the other side we saw PC gaming nestled deep into the world of computers.

Interesting enough, the rise of PC gaming began in the United States just before the Great Video Game Crash of 1983. The crash caused the public to lose faith in home consoles, and PCs were there with open arms and quickly welcomed this new audience.

How did PCs survive? Well after the crash they were clever to advertise themselves as machines that could do more than simply play games. They sold the public on the PC's ability to multitask. Yes, you could play games, but you could also manage taxes, study geography, and do homework too. PC sales began to grow and games came along with them.

The classic Commodore 64 is a great example of the PC's success at this time. It came out in 1982, and was founded by computer businessman Jack Tramiel. During its 12 year lifespan, over 17 million units were sold and a staggering 10,000 commercial programs were made. Technologically speaking, the Commodore 64 was a huge step forward. It ran on a MOS 6510 microprocessor that gave it 64 kilobytes of RAM. Wow. The display could create 16 colors, 40 columns, and 25 lines of text with 320 x 200 resolution. That might all sound quaint today, but back then that was cutting edge.

What kept people coming back was the ever increasing games and program library. You could find a program on just about anything for the Commodore 64. There were ten thousand of them, remember. But if you couldn't, and had the skills, you could probably program it yourself. And that sense of openness and opportunity for experimentation can still be found in many PC gamers today.

In the United Kingdom, another early computer ware also heavily influenced the industry, the ZX Spectrum. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Released by Sinclair Research Ltd in 1982, the ZX Spectrum, with its efficient design, was the brain child of the company's founder Sir Clive Sinclair. He was literally a genius, the guy designed a compact submarine at the age of 14, and a lover for all things computer. One of Sinclair's first creations was the ZX80. It had a great price point, but it was under-powered, even for the day. It barely had 900 bytes of RAM. In today's terms, that's about 6 tweets. Thankfully, Sinclair learned from his mistakes. The ZX Spectrum addressed a lot of the early issues and would go onto become a British gaming institution.

While it still had a few short comings and was received poorly everywhere else in the world, the ZX Spectrum had more influence over gaming in the UK than the original NES. There were six magazines and well over 24,000 games devoted to the Spectrum. It was so successful that Sinclair was knighted by Queen Elizabeth the Second. The system became a point of national pride and even won out against more technologically sound PCs like the Commodore 64.

The Spectrum inspired generations of game creators such as Chris Davis, the one man team of Mouldy Toof Studios and developer of The Escapist. Davis cited the spectrum as his inspiration, saying that "My interest in making games started back as a kid with the ZX Spectrum. While all my friends were moving into the 16-bit era, the Spectrum was my first proper dose of video gaming."

Thanks Thought Bubble. So by the start of the 1990s, PC gaming was moving towards a golden age, ushering in a number of unique gaming experiences that could only be found on the PC.

Let's start with real time strategy or RTS. This genre of PC gameplay focuses on securing locations and destroying your opponent's assets through resource gathering, base building, technological development, and indirect control of units. Dune II: the Building of a Dynasty was one of the first games to establish RTS as we know it today. The game was released in 1992 and included key elements of RTS such as a world map to chose the next mission, different factions, mobile and base unit construction, and funding through resource gathering.

But what really made RTS and Dune II so special was the use of the mouse and keyboard to move units within the game. According to its co-designer and lead programmer Joe Bostic "This greatly facilitated precise player control, which enabled the player to give orders to individual units. The mouse, and the direct control it allowed, was critical in making the RTS genre possible." This game has gone on to inspire other monumental games such as StarCraft and WarCraft.

First-Person shooters also flourished in the PC space. Using 3-D graphics, these games allowed players much greater freedom of

movement, compared to many other games at the time. Wolfenstein 3D is a game that really made this genre popular. Released in 1992 on MS-DOS, interestingly as shareware, Wolfenstein helped establish the base mechanics of this genre, and still heavily influences FPS games today. Not to mention serving as a template for Doom.

And we can't talk about PC games without mentioning simulators. Simulators attempt to simulate real-life activities like flight or surgery by allowing for freely controlled characters and environments. Now it can be argued that some simulators aren't actually games, as many are used for on the job training or education versus leisure play. But one of the most popular simulators, that is definitely a game, is Sim City.

Released in 1989 -- okay, not quite the 90s, but close enough -- Sim City simulated various aspects of city management. The game also features one of the most defining aspects of simulation, that there is no clearly defined goal for the player to achieve. And game publishers weren't too receptive to the idea. Thinking that this game would sell poorly. But Sim City was a runaway success, selling an estimated one million copies by 1992. I even own a copy of Sim City. But I own it on Super Nintendo, don't judge me it had Bowser in it.

Now we know that puzzles aren't technically considered games, but throw puzzle solving into a narrative and you've got yourself an adventure. The adventure genre is typically designed for a single player who acts as a protagonist of the story, solving puzzles to progress through the game. Now the initial adventure games were text based where the computer would translate the input into commands for the game. As PCs became more powerful, graphics were added to create an illustrated narrative.

Take Myst for example. Originally released in 1993, players walked around in an oddly quiet mysterious island, attempting to solve various puzzles and riddles. The game was unusual for the time because it provided little character backstory, there was no physical violence, and no goals laid out for the player. I'm sensing a trend here with PC games. But Myst was a huge success and helped pave a new avenue in the puzzle gaming genre. Inspiring games like 7th Guest, 11th Hour, and even its own sequel. Also we can thank Myst for helping drive the adoption of the CD-ROM. You're welcome PlayStation and other future gaming consoles.

With the 90s we also saw the rise of LAN parties or local area network parties. These were gatherings where people could connect their computers to play multiplayer games. In 2013, Sweden saw the biggest LAN party to date with over 17,000 devices connected during the DreamHack festival. Today, we see unprecedented access to PC games. Internet portal sites are popping up, like Newgrounds and Kongregate, delivering gaming to millions. Sites like Neopets have become commonplace, allowing anyone to log in and play from anywhere.

PC gaming has also led to the rise of gaming platforms like Steam by Valve. Steam is an online service that distributes games and other media created by developers to its shared subscriber base. Officially released in 2003, Valve has continued to thrive for years, and may be ushering in the next golden age of PC gaming. There are over 125 million active Steam user worldwide, and the system has over 45 hundred games and 400 million items created by users. Valve even has its own VR unit, but we'll get into that in the next episode.

And PC gaming really sets itself apart because both players and creators can take part in the creation process. Take MODs for example, where people alter a game mechanic to their own, often bizarre, liking. The practice of MODing has led to all kinds of wonderfully bizarre, funny, and challenging new games, like Macho Man Randy Savage in Skyrim, or Marty McFly in his time travelling DeLorean on the streets of San Andreas in Grand Theft Auto. This can also led to a problem like cheating but I digress, not going to get into that. That's your conscience.

It's clear that PC gaming is thriving and continues to inform many games on a variety of platforms. Some game genres truly are best when played on a PC, and many great games can only be played on this platform. PC gaming has inspired originality in game development like no other platform. It's come a long way since Minesweeper. Which can someone really tell me the rules of Minesweeper, I still don't get it.

Thanks for watching, and we'll see you next time.

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and it's made with the help of all of these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our Patrons in general and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lizop, and our Vice Principal, Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.