The return of pre-Internet games consoles such as the ZX Spectrum and the Atari 2600

May 15 2015, by John Stevenson

Released 33 years ago, the ZX Spectrum computer was an 8-bit personal home computer made in the UK by Sir Clive Sinclair's Sinclair Research Ltd. The Spectrum was among the first home computers in the UK to reach a mainstream audience with parallels to the reach of the Commodore 64 in the USA. The ZX Spectrum, with its high-resolution colour graphics and sound, was a bonanza to computer gamers enjoying games such as Football Manager, Airwolf, BC Bill and Action Fighter.

This classic computer console has made a millennial comeback in the form of the Sinclair ZX Spectrum Vega.

The first pre-ordered ZX Spectrum Vega consoles will be distributed at the end of May to 1000 customers at the cost of £100 and will be loaded

with 1000 games such as BMX Ninja and Hungry Horace. By September it is hoped that another 10,000 units will be produced depending on demand.This reincarnation of the ZX Spectrum taps into a warm vein of nostalgia for an innovative do-it-yourself sensibility which early games developers were enthused with. Games consoles such as the Atari 2600 and the Commodore 64 have also been recently updated for 21st century gamers. Lecturer in Computer Games Technology in the Department of Computer Science, Dr Chris Child, who himself learned to program using the ZX Spectrum, explains:

"There was a depth of innovation in the early games. An army of bedroom programmers developed games that didn't need the high budgets of large teams, so it was easier to take an interesting idea and run with it, even if there was no obvious commercial appeal. The constraint of the hardware also forced innovation in things like procedural generation (e.g. Elite) and optimized level design (e.g. Gauntlet)."

In recent times, the ease of access to the market for the developers of mobile and Steam games and free development platforms (e.g. Unity and Unreal), has seen a new wave of innovation at the indie level. Low-budget and art games like Pappa & Yo deliberately set out to deliver a message and are fun to play.

Does this all mean that today's young players of computer games are at a disadvantage in not having to experiment as much with programming, given the plethora of apps on the market today? Dr Child, the creator of International Cricket Captain, says there are opportunities for people at all ages to get to grips with programming:

"The abundance of apps has produced a wealth of options for consumers, but sadly, not so many to encourage developers. If you scratch the surface enough, though, there is now an incredible range of

apps to encourage programmers at various levels, from Daisy the Dinosaur to Kodable for kids, through to Scratch, Unity and Unreal, where full-scale apps can be developed with a relatively gentle learning curve. Programming with these apps can indeed be more fun than painting, drawing and writing. We just need to encourage children to take the first step and the rest will follow naturally."

Provided by City University London

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