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CAMELLI AND ATTACK OF THE MUTANT CAMELS

A Variantology of Italian Video Games of the 1980s

RICCARDO FASSONE

A MICRO-HISTORY OF CLONING

The period between 1983 and 1985 marked the beginning of a series of processes and dynamics that would inform the nature of video game production, distribution and consumption in Italy throughout the rest of the decade and into the first half of the 1990s. Launched in Italy in March 1983, the Commodore 64 quickly became the preferred microcomputer for Italian players, thanks to an aggressive price policy and an often informal but efficient distribution network (Tarantino & Tosoni, 2017). C64s were sold in home appliances stores, in music stores, in general electronic stores, or bought via mail order from Germany. In the same period, a number of publications designed to capture the interest of microcomputer owners started emerging. Books such as *Il mio primo libro sui computer* [*My First Computer Book*] (Novelli, 1983), *Il mio primo libro di Basic* [*My First Basic Textbook*] (Novelli, 1984) served the didactic purpose of introducing home computing to adolescents and young adults. Magazines such as *Electronic Games*, *HC-Home Computers*, and *Computer Games* offered video game criticism and technical information on the use of home computers in varying proportions. With the translation, released by the prestigious publisher Feltrinelli in 1985, of *Micromania. The Whole Truth About Computers* (Platt,

1984), a semi-serious account of computer culture for the general audience, it might be said that computers had become recognized household objects and gained prominence in social discourses.

This inevitably partial account of the introduction of home- and microcomputers, and, in turn, domestic video games in Italy, characterized by technological advancement, economic success, and a stable rise in visibility and social acceptance, while accounting for an understudied local context, conforms to a much criticized (e.g. in Guins, 2014) tendency of general video game historiography, that often seeks unequivocal causation and teleological drive when retelling the complex vicissitudes of the medium. As noted by Nooney (2013), “videogame history struggles to represent itself as much more than a chronology of consoles, games, and programmers”, a precise trajectory, informed for the most part by the commodification of technological advancement, that can be found in many video game history books (e.g. Kent 2001). While possibly relevant in its local focus, a research on Italian video games of the 1980s that retraces such a “tempting, gratifying, and coherent” (Wade, 2016, p. 1) narrative may fail to grasp the often chaotic nature of video game production and culture in 1980s Italy. For this reason, this article proposes a micro-historical¹ exploration of the practice of unauthorized cloning through an analysis of *Cammelli*, a clone of *Attack of The Mutant Camels* sold in newsstands in a bundle-tape for the C64 along with several other cloned games. The reconstruction and discussion of this very common semi-illicit practice and its implications for the production and distribution of video games in Italy will allow me to test a historiographical

1. The term “microhistory” was popularized by historian Carlo Ginzburg (1980), who used it in his account of the life of a miller in Sixteenth Century north-eastern Italy. Ginzburg uses it to describe a historiographical practice that focuses a) on small or even personal stories and b) on stories involving subordinate classes and popular culture. While the political scope of this article is different than Ginzburg’s, I certainly advocate for a small-scale, popular history of video games.

method that aims at eschewing the exercise of canonizing power and focuses on smaller-scale phenomena and their relation with wider media contexts.

A METHOD AND A DISPOSITION

This article is part of a larger research on the history of Italian video game production. For this reason, it shares with the whole of the research a series of methodological assumptions and practices. On the other hand, due to the nature of the article – a case study aiming at illuminating a series of complex contingencies – it is also informed by what could be defined as a peculiar disposition or inclination. The methodology employed in the research is based upon three sets of specific tools grouped under a more general assumption. These tools are a) in-depth historiographical interviews with relevant informants. In the case of this article, I conducted a series of nine interviews with developers, crackers and players who were active in the 1980s. b) An analysis of publications – with a specific focus on video game magazines – released in the considered time frame, performed in order to single out relevant discourses and, possibly more importantly, trace the connections between video game development, play, and discursive production. c) What can be described as an encounter with the objects. As noted by Kittler (1999, p. 5) in a plea in favor of the epistemological relevance (and, at times, resistance) of materials that do not imply the written word, “discourse analysis cannot be applied to sound archives or towers of film rolls”. In this sense, the analysis of video games as cultural objects is necessarily informed by the encounter with and the manipulation of their materiality. Cassettes, cartridges, manuals, boxes, flyers, and more importantly that peculiar material that is video game code, supplement the historical work by providing information on what Guins (2014, p. 9), via Appadurai, describes as “a thing’s ‘total trajectory’, a composite of phases or situations – shifts in context – that determine a thing’s value, function, and possible

meanings”. The general assumption under which I am operating is one of ecological or ecosystemic concern. That is, the idea that, especially in the context of 1980s Italy, video game production, distribution, and play, cannot be understood in absence of the wider media ecology. In the instance of this article’s case study, as I will claim, one cannot assess the value of *Cammelli* if the analysis of the game is decoupled from its specific reframing as a serialized product, found in newsstands alongside comic books, hobbyist magazines, and other products.

As for the disposition or inclination of this specific article, it might be said that I will adopt an *anarchaeological* outlook on the object of my research. Most of the methodological concerns expressed so far – namely the skepticism of canonizing histories and the interest in materiality – may be ascribed to the general ethos of media archaeology, a theoretically-inclined branch of media history that adopts a decidedly Foucauldian historiographical paradigm (especially Foucault, 2002) in the study of discontinuities rather than unifying narratives, materiality rather than social constructs, dead or discarded media technologies rather than current ones (see e.g. Ernst, 2013; Parikka, 2012). Despite a general adherence to media-archaeological practices, this article will argue for an anarchaeological reading of *Cammelli*. Introduced by Rudi Visker (1991), the term anarchaeology was popularized by the work of media historian Siegfried Zielinski (2006), and refers to an approach to history that refuses to identify a primary, standardized set of objects for analysis [...]. By opening the spectrum of potential objects and paths, the historian of media will need to accept the risk of unsuccessful searches, but will be rewarded by unexpected—and thus particularly precious—finds (Natale, 2012, p. 525)

According to Zielinski, the Foucauldian endeavor of media archaeology cannot resist creating alternative, but possibly

equally hegemonic, chronologies, thus engendering a peculiar kind of paradox:

By seeking, collecting, and sorting, the archaeologist attaches meanings; and these meanings may be entirely different from the ones the objects had originally. The paradox that arises when engaged in this work is that one is dependent upon the instruments of cultural techniques for ordering and classifying, while, at the same time, one's goal is to respect diversity and specialness. The only resolution of this dilemma is to reject the notion that this work is ground-breaking: to renounce power, which one could easily grasp, is much more difficult than to attain a position where it is possible to wield it. (Zielinski, 2006, p. 27)

In this sense, an object such as *Cammelli*, as I will try to demonstrate, invites an anarchaological reading in at least two senses. Its dubious legal status of pirated clone, somehow seems to push this specific game at the edge of video game history: this is not an uncommon, little-known gem, nor a cult favorite, but rather the appropriation and – one could speculate – the effacement of a highly praised game such as *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, an act of dethronement that is in itself anarchaological. Second, by undergoing the cloning treatment, Jeff Minter's game is not only deprived of its authorial legitimacy, but also serialized and inserted in the veritable *mess* of clones, dupes, broken cracks released every month in Italian newsstands in the second half of the 1980s². In other words, I will claim that by becoming *Cammelli*, *Attack of the Mutant Camels* was extracted from the art history of video games and placed in what could be defined a *variantology* of video game production, a Zielinskian term (Zielinski & Wagnermaier, 2005) that describes the multitude of

2. While it is hard to estimate a precise number of publications distributing pirated video games in the 1980s, it is safe to assume that these were in the dozens. The website *Edicola 8 bit* lists more than fifty publications, released by publishers such as Edizioni Foglia S.R.L., Edizioni Hobby, and Edizione Logica 2000.

media histories, whose “place of abode is the possible, and reality, which has actually happened, becomes a shadow by comparison” (Zielinski, 2006, p. 28).

CAMMELLI AS A SERIAL OBJECT

In May 1984 the first issue of *Special Program* hit the newsstands. Published by SIPE S.r.l., one of the many publishers specializing in video game and computer magazines, *Special Program* n. 1/1984 was composed of a 32-pages booklet and a cassette tape with ten games: five for the C64 (side A), and five for the ZX Spectrum (side B). The booklet featured the descriptions of the games, along with a number of other columns, ranging from modules of code to be typed into the reader’s C64s to classified ads. The first game found on side A is *Cammelli*; the description on the booklet reads: “I cammelli robot sono tremendi: meno male che la nostra astronave può metterli in condizione di scoppiare: basta saper sparare” [Robot camels are the worst: luckily our spaceship can blow them up. You only need to learn how to shoot] (Special Program, 1984, p. 8). A screenshot of the game depicts a blueish camel being chased by a small spaceship, while on the top and bottom of the screen a series of gauges read “Punteggio” [Score], “Settore” [Sector], “Navi” [Ships]. *Cammelli* is a clone of *Attack of The Mutant Camels* a game published by Jeff Minter’s Llamasoft the previous year to almost unanimous critical acclaim, that iterated the shoot’em up mechanic found in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (Atari, 1982). In this context, defining *Cammelli* as a clone essentially means that, barring a series of linguistic adaptations produced ex-post, the game uses the exact same code of *Attack of The Mutant Camels*. While in the case of this specific game it is not known how the code was obtained, it is reasonable to think that – as in the case of several other games of the period – an Italian cracker³ had obtained

3. I am using the term ‘cracker’ as an alternative to ‘hacker’, since most of my informants consistently referred to themselves and their circle as such.

an original copy of the game and cracked it in order to resell it to SIPE S.r.l. Along with *Attack of The Mutant Camels*, the cassette tape features clones of *Motor Mania* (United Microware Industries, 1982) (titled *Corsa d'auto* [Car race]), *Falcon Patrol* (Virgin Games, 1983) (titled *Attacco F104* [F104 Attack]) and others, all very likely to have been obtained through the same route. It should be noted that this is a substantially different practice than those documented in other European nations such as Germany. While in the case of games such as *Great Giana Sisters* (Time Warp Productions, 1987), the cloning process involved a noticeable reworking of the original games, whose sprites and music were often completely modified, in the case of Italian clones, only splash screens and titles were changed.

Special Program, along with a growing number of other similar publications, kept appearing in newsstands, month after month, for about eight years, publishing hundreds of games in bundles. *Cammelli*, the first game on Side A of the first cassette published with the magazine, is a prototypical example of the framing processes that the cloned games underwent in order to be incorporated into the neo-canon represented by periodic publishing, and for this reason was chosen as a case study. The first form of framing can be described as serialization (Fassone, 2014; 2017), a practice of grouping of heterogeneous materials – in this case games produced by different developers and usually meant for distribution in stores as standalone products – under a common denominator. This is obtained through the use of what Genette (1997, p. 16) describes as “publisher peritext”, a series of semiotic markers, produced by the publisher – SIPE S.r.l. in this case – in order to create or reinforce a consistency among otherwise different materials. In the case of *Special Program*, the games are described side by side in a dedicated column of the booklet, thus reinforcing their serialized nature, and, more importantly, the title screen of each game is modified in order to include the captions “Program presenta” [Program presents] and

“Copyright 1984 Program”, an ironic form of appropriation for a company that was essentially distributing pirated software.

A second form of framing happens in the wider context of distribution practices adopted by SIPE S.r.l. and its competitors. Stefan Roda, a former cracker, game developer and project manager for Genias, one of the earlier Italian software houses, when discussing the role of newsstands in the distribution of video games claims that: “It was an Italian thing. Every information on games was found in newsstands, so quite naturally it became the main distributive channel for games themselves [...] there were no proper computer stores” (interview with the author). Between 1984 and the end of the decade, newsstands gained a dominant position in the distribution of games; games sold as part of a magazine bundle were the norm, and the network of newsstands, reaching less densely populated and rural areas, offered a platform for widespread distribution. According to Tarantino and Tosoni (2017, p. 242), newsstands «historically [played] a central role in the distribution of software». This is also proven by a number of trade catalogs released by publishers such as Jackson, that list numerous software-related publications conceived to be distributed in newsstands all over the country. By virtue of its peculiar positioning within a mixed distribution that featured both periodic publishing and games, *Cammelli* turned from the relatively stable, standalone object that was *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, into a module within an economy of serialized, periodical distribution.

SOFT HACKING AND DE-AUTHORIALIZATION

During an interview I conducted with Federico Croci, a former employee of Simulmondo, a software house founded in Bologna in 1987, now owner of Italy’s only pinball museum, he told me a revealing anecdote:

When I was working at Simulmondo [probably around 1988] I got to meet a cracker living in Altedo [near Bologna]. He was a small-time pirate, nothing to do with the professional pirates that were active in Germany. This guy managed to crack our game *Italy 90 Soccer* (Simulmondo, 1988), and Francesco Carlà, the owner of Simulmondo, managed to get in touch with him. We ended up hiring him as a hardware consultant. (Federico Croci, interview with the author)

A number of articles dealing with the early history of home computing paint a picture of the hacker as a politically-conscious actor, deliberately resisting to the commodification and mainstreaming of computing. Alberts & Oldenziel (2014, p. 12), for example, claim that the rebellion of young users toying with personal computers without a prescribed purpose, the sense of personal control, and the celebration of “connectedness” came together in specific European ways and [...] engineers, teenagers, media artists, and social activists participated in the process of appropriation, helping to bridge the gap between the globally produced products and their—at times—exaggerated technological expectations.

While it is certainly true – as demonstrated by Švelch (2013) – that in specific contexts, practices of political appropriation of software and hardware were part of the hackers’ ethos, it might be said that the Italian context favored practices of what could be defined as *soft hacking*. The anonymous cracker hired by a software house, the many pirates who moved on to make their own games such as Stefan Roda, and even professional pirates – among the most active the 2704 cracking group and Pier – existed in a gray area between hobbyism and professionalization and were in most cases more than willing to sell their work to publishers such as SIPE S.r.l.. In this sense, practices such as cracking and piracy were prevalent both within contexts of vernacular or hyper-local distribution (computer clubs, hacker circles, etc.), and in the relatively more institutionalized

newsstand tape market. In fact, the Italian context seems to conform to a wider trend in southern Europe, most notably in Greece, in which [the cracker] was more like an advanced user who could crack the protection of a program and examine its programming properties, change elements of its code, and copy it before selling on to a third party for a certain price or use it himself according to his needs. Ultimately he was the one who could solve issues such as the adaptation of home computer software to the needs of the Greek user community (Lekkas, 2014, p. 89)

This tendency is reflected in *Cammelli*, in which, besides cracking the protection of the game, the cracker had acted as a linguistic mediator, translating the English text, while a further mediation had been engendered by *Special Program*'s short description of the game in Italian.

While crackers very rarely took an overtly activist position in Italy, the process described thus far cannot be deemed unpolitical, at least in the sense of the adoption of distinct non-authorial politics⁴. The title screen of the C64 version of *Attack of the Mutant Camels* reads "Jeff Minter Presents: *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, from the creator of *Gridrunner*", a precise authorial statement that percolates in some of the game's reviews, and echoes in contemporary video game histories, such as Donovan's Minter built up a cult following with games such as *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, a psychedelic shoot 'em up where players battle against giant camels [...]. The taste for strangeness became so widespread that 'British surrealism' became a loose stylistic movement that decorated familiar game concepts in the outlandish imaginations of their creators. (Donovan, 2010, p. 117)

4. A notable exception to this is represented by a few locally produced text adventures, advertised in publisher Jackson's 1984 trade catalog alongside their authors' names.

The inclusion of *Cammelli* in *Special Program*'s own canon implied the removal of every sign of Minter's authorship through the substitution of the opening captions, and, more importantly, a decoupling from its original habitat – that of the British scene of independent developers – thus producing an alternative, possibly more chaotic, history of C64 video games for the Italian audience.

PIRACY AS AN ALTERNATIVE ART HISTORY OF GAMES

In an article on the history of the Italian game industry Tarantino & Tosoni (2017) claim that in the 1980s in Italy software piracy had at least two forms: proper piracy – that is the distribution of cracked software via non-institutional channels – and unauthorized linguistic adaptation, as in the case of *Cammelli* and a multitude of similar games distributed in newsstands. The two scholars claim that the persistence of this semi-illegal market – whose gray-area status was eventually terminated in 1993 when piracy law 547 was approved⁵ – had three distinct but interrelated effects on the growth of the sector. As we have seen with the case of Stefan Roda, it allowed for a degree of permeability between hobbyism and professionalism, with pirates becoming developers or programmers; it hampered the development of an high-revenue, structured industry, by multiplying entrepreneurial risk; it favored technological inertia, as older machines such as the C64 continued to be relevant on the market beyond their life cycle due to the massive distribution of cheap, pirated software.

While the industrial and economic implications of the pervasiveness of piracy in Italy are certainly relevant for a history of Italian video games, I will offer a different framing of this phenomenon, and define the peculiar form of piracy represented

5. It should be noted that before law 547 was approved, early Italian video game distributors such as Leader had started a lobbying campaign against piracy that involved advertisements and features in major magazines.

by linguistic adaptation and bundle tapes as an *applied variantology*. In Zielinski's formulation, the history of media is in itself a variantology, a collection of interconnected but recognizable phenomena that should be investigated through an anarchaeological method rather than through the means of canonization via cause-effect relations. While Zielinski does not explicitly acknowledge it, it might be said that variantology, as a historiographical mode, and anarchaeology, as a method, act as meta-historical discourses, that is, not just as ways to investigate objects and phenomena of the past, but also – and maybe more precisely – as theoretical assumptions on the nature of historiography. In this sense, Zielinski's theory, as a historiographical narrative, may be an example of the relevance of Hayden White's (1973, xi) adage according to which "there can be no 'proper history' which is not at the same time 'philosophy of history'". The field of Italian adaptations of foreign video games, of which *Cammelli* is a prototype, may be said to somehow crystallize a precise, identifiable variant within conventional video game history. If, with Foucault (2002, p. 32), in an archaeological exploration "a provisional division must be adopted as an initial approximation: an initial region that analysis will subsequently demolish and, if necessary, reorganize", it might be said that the games released in Italian newsstands between 1984 and 1993 may constitute such a field and, at the same time, represent a form of pragmatic variantology.

One way to analyze the objects and relations found in this field is historiographical research in the proper sense. Endeavors such as this article aim at highlighting the relevance of an object such as *Cammelli* for the pursuit and description of alternative art histories of video games, in which, for example, Jeff Minter is not the *auteur* of *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, but a link in the longer chain of *Special Program's Cammelli*. This is, at least in part, what Jaakko Suominen (2016) describes as a "pathology" of game

history, a deep excavation that seeks to recognize and unearth the symptoms of a more complex history than the canonical or hegemonic ones. This pathological approach, which, as noted by Suominen (2016, p. 12) “seem[s] to be an increasingly popular trend among studies of game history”, is not the only possible – or even fruitful – approach to a variantology of game histories. Working on this article, I have collected a number of artifacts – magazines, tapes, photos, interviews etc. – pertaining to the distribution of video games in Italy in the 1980s. What I could not find, I managed to consult via websites such as *Edicola 8 Bit* [8 Bit Newsstand] (specialprogramsipe.altervista.org), a vernacular archival project that aims at collecting and sharing newsstand bundles produced in Italy between 1984 and 1993. *Edicola 8 Bit* is what Suominen would ascribe to the “enthusiast” genre of game historiography, a bottom-up endeavor usually undertaken by non-professionals, that, in the case of the website, has an “antiquarian” goal, that is the production of “a catalogue and not a list of individual, selected monuments and turning point moments. It’s a guide that aims to introduce all of the games to one particular sector” (Suominen, 2016, p. 7). In the case of *Edicola 8 Bit*, the antiquarian mode of historiography is supplemented by a comparative drive: every game is presented alongside its *original* version. In the case of *Cammelli*, the game is presented in the context of a comparison with Minter’s game, and users can download ROMs of both games. *Edicola 8 Bit*’s antiquarian history presents *Cammelli* as an actual variant, a byproduct of canonical history, but at the same time, by aiming at collecting the entirety of a Foucauldian “region”, implicitly advocates for a simultaneous, synoptic variantology, an alternative potential history among the multiple histories of the medium.

CONCLUSIONS

Depending on one’s positioning, *Cammelli* can be described as an unauthorized adaptation of a previous game, an act of

appropriation, or a relatively straightforward clone. This article has explored the implications of a game such as *Cammelli* for video game history, claiming that it can be understood as the result of a process of serialization, as an example of soft hacking, and as a prototype of a pragmatic variantology. The article claims that the productivity of the metahistorical stances of media archaeology, and specifically of Zielinski's anarachaeology, can be verified through the analysis of single objects such as *Cammelli*, used as indicators or symptoms of a more general field or region of media history. In the case of 1980s Italy, *Cammelli* demonstrates the existence of alternative local game histories that cannot be retraced only through exceptional cases (the occasional masterpiece, the notable example, etc.), but should be understood through the analysis of lower intensity processes and practices and of non-exceptional, often banal, cases such as adapted clones.

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