

History of Digital Games in Turkey

Erdal YILMAZ

Middle East Technical University
Inonu Bulvarı, Ankara, Turkey
+90-312-5952186
eyilmaz@ii.metu.edu.tr

Kursat CAGILTAY, Ph.D.

Middle East Technical University
Inonu Bulvarı, Ankara, Turkey
+90 312 2103683
kursat@metu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

As an important entertainment tool, “digital games” has been used by several hundred millions of people all around the world for almost 30 years. Although the number of game players and total game-play time in Turkey shows parallel figures to the world average, unfortunately very limited digital game development activities and academic studies regarding this issue exist. Therefore, this study aims to summarize the history and current situation of digital games and game industry in Turkey.

Keywords

Local game history, Turkish digital games

INTRODUCTION

Turkish people met the magic of computer games later than the people in the western world, but parallelism have been achieved in a short time. Today, it is easy to find latest games, PC hardware or game consoles in Turkey. Average game playing durations, habits and preferences of Turkish game players show similarity to those of developed countries [1]. If we examine this case from game development activities we can not mention such a parallelism. In our knowledge there is no special game hardware development activity that is worth to mention. In the following sections we will mention the digital games development activities beginning from late 1980s. In order to better express this uncovered history, we first summarize the history of digital games in the world. Then, we try to summarize significant Turkish game development activities up to now. Lack of academic studies in this field required us to use popular resources, our observations, and collection of anecdotal comments.

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HISTORY OF DIGITAL GAMES

In 1962, Massachusetts Institute of Technology student Steve Russell created Spacewar, the first interactive computer game that runs on million-dollar Digital PDP-1 mainframes [2]. An arcade version of this game was developed in 1971. In 1972, TV sets became active devices with the invention of Pong that can be connected to TV sets in houses [3]. Space Invaders, the first true game hit was released in 1978 by Atari [4]. Atari Company continued to sign many first applications in video game industry and invented the first coin-operated game machine, Asteroids. In 1981, another two legendary games Pac-Man and Donkey Kong were released respectively by Namco and Nintendo.

In 1982, Commodore released the Commodore-64 personal computer at a price around 600 dollars and within a year they dropped the prices dramatically and became the best-selling computer of all time. This new machine was using audiotapes and offering many games to the users. Parents preferred this machine because it was also a computer, not just a game console. In 1985 Russians contributed the game industry with legendary Tetris. In 1990, Nintendo released Super Mario 3, probably the best-selling video game cartridge of all time.

A new game genre FPS (first person shooter) was introduced by ID Software with the release of Wolfenstein-3D. The Computer Gaming World Hall of Fame recognized Wolfenstein-3D as helping to shape the overall direction of the computer gaming industry. Later, more sophisticated titles, Doom (1994) and Quake series (1996) followed the path of Wolfenstein-3D. The Deep Blue computer of IBM succeeded to beat World Chess Champion Gary Kasparov in 1997 after a full chess match. Nowadays, the game industry produces games with better quality of graphics, sound and AI.

HISTORY OF GAME PLAY IN TURKEY

Turkey started to become familiar with digital games together with color TV sets, VCRs and similar electronic goods since 1983 when government accepted free market policies at a time when yearly national income was around US\$1000. Only a lucky minority could afford to buy first game consoles or 8 bit computers. In early 1980s, there were limited numbers of entertainment alternatives. The only black&white government-operated TV channel was broadcasting in limited hours. The pressure of the military coup in 1980 was still active. Under these circumstances the fantasy world of digital games attracted potential gamers rapidly. This potential caused the birth of new term “Atari Salonu” (Atari Hall). Many children, not able to afford buying a game console, were playing games in these halls until midnight under heavy cigarette smoke. The inappropriate conditions in these game halls caused parents to antipathize with the name Atari. People over 50 in Turkey are still prejudiced to this trademark. The potential profit in this industry encouraged many entrepreneurs. People used to hire Atari 2600 game consoles on a daily basis (more expensive in weekends).

The parents and governmental bodies reacted in a short time. Policemen or parents picked children from game halls, boutiques, or video rental offices etc. where they saw kids playing video games. Government made amendment to the related law #2559 on June 16th of 1985 and make it possible to open such halls after getting permission from the highest local administrator.

Beginning from the mid 1980s, cheaper electronic handheld games and some personal computers like Sinclair ZX Spectrum, Vic 20, and Commodore 64 brought the digital games into Turkish houses. Later Amiga and similar multimedia computers and IBM compatible PCs and game consoles became popular.

GAME DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES IN TURKEY

There are very limited game development related activities that were successfully completed. In this paper, we will not mention the work that can be evaluated as demo, mind games or simple educational tools.

1980s, Level 1 begins (amateur stage)

Some computer science people developed very simple games like tic-tac-toe on main-frame computers before 1980, as quoted. It is also mentioned that similar projects were done by university students during late 1970s and early 1980s. However, there is no documentation available about these projects. As already explained, not until mid 1980s, most of the Turkish people could not afford Personal Computers or game consoles. Sinclair ZX Spectrum, Vic20, Commodore64, Amstrad or MSX series were the first computers that allowed Turkish people to develop software. Among these computers Commodore64 is the most popular one which offered many games. It is worth mentioning the role of Commodore magazine that delivered printed copies of source codes of simple games in those days. Many people had to learn game programming from similar sources because it was very difficult to find books regarding this issue. In 1984 Ozden Kilicay published a book in Turkish, “Uygulamali Basic” (Applied BASIC Programming Language Book for Sinclair Spectrum, ZX81, Vic20, Commodore64, ZX81, BBC A/B, Electron, Oric-Atmos, Texas TI99, Apple Iie and Sharp MZ80K). It is important that this book covers a special section which explains simple tricks of writing games and gives source codes of simple games. His next book, “Commodore64, Peek-Poke&Machine Code”, which was published in 1986, mainly mentions the graphics, sprites and other game related capabilities of Commodore64 and includes 20 example games written in BASIC. The only game development attempt that can be mentioned in this decade is “Keloglan” which is about a famous fable hero in Turkish culture. Byte Computer Company prepared this adventure game by using “adventure game creator” software probably in 1989. This attempt was not successful and only few people played it. But the point that we should notice is this local game development attempt used a national hero. Toward the end of 1980s, Amiga 500 series became popular which would be the main platform for first Turkish game titles.

1990s, Level 2 begins (semi-professional stage)

With its superb multimedia capabilities, Amiga opened new roads to the amateur game developers and first game ideas and game developer groups were began to emerge in early 1990s. Especially the AMOS software that makes game development easier encouraged many programmers. Sedat Cologlu is one of the main actors of this period when Turkish game development activities completed level 1 (amateur period) and passed to the 2nd level (semi-professional). In 1992 Digital Dreams led by Cologlu published first boxed game called “Hancer” (The Dagger). Following paragraph summarizes the interesting story of this game development activity, depending on the experiences that Sedat Cologlu kindly shared with us.

In 1990, he organized APUC (Amiga Professional Users Club) with 450 members. Producing a Turkish strategy game was one of most outstanding project ideas. In November 1990, he completed the scenario of this game and shared the idea with club members. Many people ranging from professional graphics artists to historians supported this project. They paid attention for details including important historical events, accessories of medieval age, child physiology etc. Many academicians including educators consulted them. Before the release of the game, they advertised it in a local Amiga magazine. One of the most interesting parts of this story is the preparation phase of game diskettes. There were 3 diskettes in one set and copying one diskette requires approximately 3.5 minutes plus some extra time for verification. Volunteer APUC members with external floppy drives helped them to overcome this production problem. After a year of hard work the game was ready for release in 1992. In early 1990s, software piracy was quite rampant. Original boxed game sales were around 300 for good Amiga titles. The Dagger sold more than 2200 original copies in 2 years. The price was US\$ 15. Development cost of one set was US\$ 7. If we consider the share of game markets, it is clear that these figures are far away from encouraging capital owners to support the game industry.



Figure 1: Cover Illustration and Screenshots from “The Dagger”.
(Courtesy of Sedat Cologlu)

Until 1995, half a dozen of Amiga games were released in Turkey. These games are “Istanbul Efsaneleri: Lale Savaşçıları” (Legends of Istanbul: Tulip Warriors) and “Umut Tarlaları” (Fields of Hope) by Siliconworx, “Muhtar” (the term used for the official headman of a village), Asterix (an adventure game by Locus) and “Zeka Kutusu” (mind games set by Vefasoft). After 1995, PCs began to replace the role of Amiga. Legends of Istanbul was ported to PC platform in 1996. In the same year Cartoon Studios released their cartoon-rendered comedy adventure game “Dedektif Firtina” (Detective Storm). Later they released their movie-adventure game “Gercegin Otesinde” (Beyond the Truth) in 1998.

In order to have a better idea about Turkish game development history, we should mention about Siliconworx and Compuphiliacs groups which were the most active actors during the semi-professional period. Fields of Hope was the first commercial game of Siliconworx. It was a farm management simulation. General characteristics of the mentioned groups shaped up with this game. When we examine this game it can be seen that it has almost all of the properties of professional games such as retail packaging, user manual, original musical scores, copy protection etc. Such professional properties were handled by assigning multi-roles to every member of the team. For example, lead programmer Ozgur Ozol also prepared game musics, worked on game design, and prepared some graphics and user manual. This situation was similar for every other team member. One of the most important facts about this game is the distribution method. It is reported that each team member visited potential game sellers with their backpacks full of Fields of Hope game boxes. The game was offered at consignment to the stores, not much differently than goods in the arts and crafts markets. They managed to sell 1000 copies with this method. Total revenue was barely equal to recover the box, diskette and labeling costs. No matter the number of sales this game is still remembered as one of the most successful and enjoyable Turkish digital game. Details regarding this game can be seen on Figure 2.



Figure 2: Fields of Hope: Left: Front cover, Center: Back cover, Right: Screenshot of the game (Courtesy of Siliconworx)

After the release of the Fields of Hope, Siliconworx began working on their second game “Legends of Istanbul: Tulip Warriors”. It was completed in 1994. Development and delivery phases show many parallel figures to their first game. It is the first Turkish RPG which is remembered for its original game musics, graphics and easy gameplay. Similarly this game was also sold less than 2000 copies.

Since the PCs started to become popular, months before the release of the Amiga version, Siliconworx and Compuphiliacs decided to cooperate on Legends of Istanbul to port it into PC platform. Compuphiliacs rewrote the game for several times to keep up with the changing technology and to overcome technical challenges faced on the way. After re-writing code and changing graphics a few times they began to consider delivering the game on CD-ROMs which was another new technology. At that time one of the leading music industry companies of Turkey offered to deliver this game professionally. In 1996 after another period of development in a basement office of this company Compuphiliacs completed the game. The publishing

company determined the price as US\$35 which was quite expensive for a single game. Total retail sales were around 2000. One year later, the game CD was bundled with popular game magazines and another 45000 copies were distributed this way. The developers of the game earned total US\$ 10.000 including bundle sale shares.

As stated before, this game was distributed by a professional company which was something new for Turkish game market. Classical multi-role approach was also used in this game. It was possible to see a programmer that works as a cameraman or composer.

This was the transition period from amateur game development to professional. The amateur groups that developed these games used their personal friendship and close ties forged in their high school years to create a team spirit. Although no company was founded and the game sales recover only material expenses, the developers still insisted on developing these games in dark basement rooms and in the face of adverse conditions. The only motivation behind their activities was the production of local games for Turkish people.

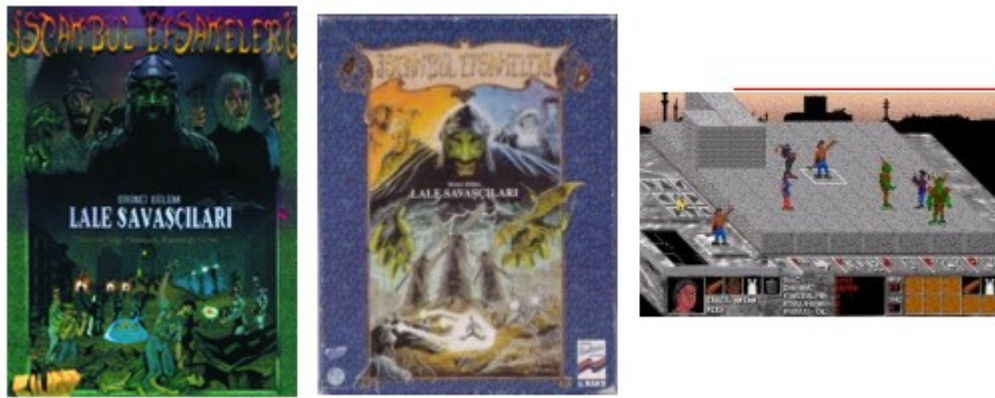


Figure 3: Legends of Istanbul: Left: Amiga Poster, Center: PC Version Front Cover, Right: Screenshot of the game (Courtesy of Siliconworx and Compuhilliacs)

After 2000, Level 3 begins (professional stage)

One of the important events in 2000 for Turkish game industry is the return of Mevlut Dinc from the UK to his homeland after 20 years. Mevlut Dinc who produced many good game titles in the UK since early 1980s (Enduro Racer, Last Ninja 2, Hammer Fist, Time machine, First Samurai, Street Racer, Scars) decided to continue his way with local talents in Turkey. One year after he started his business in Turkey, he managed to release first Turkish game in international market, which was totally written by Turkish university students. “Dual Blades”, a clever mix of fighting games, was prepared for the GameBoy Advance console, published by Metro 3D both in the US and Japan. There are Turkish Heroes in this fighting game. Mevlut Dinc now owns a company called “Sobee”. “Football Manager”, a real-time multiplayer football management simulation in which players compete against each other is now played more than 25,000 subscribers. Another Sobee game is an on-line 3D billiards game in which thousands of players competes. This game was developed with the help of and endorsed by the World Billiards Champion Semih Sayginer. Sobee’s current cutting edge game is Istanbul. This massively multiplayer online game takes place in the historical quarters of Istanbul. Sobee is not the only professional game house of

Turkey. Yogurt technologies, Cinemedia and 3TE Games published their first game “Pusu” (ambush) in May 2005. In this TPS (Third Person Shooter) game a Turkish boy fights against bad guys. It is also reported that Yogurt and 3TE have started another game project. Another professional game that will be sold in International market in this year is “Culpa Innata” by Momentum-DMT. In this adventure game they use some of their patent-pending technologies in 3D face-modeling, animation and lip synchronization. Kabus22 (Nightmare 22) is another title in which developers work hard to finish in this year. Besides those professional games there are many amateur or semi-professional ones. Some of them have few hundred fans. For example open beta version of “Mount&Blade” a game which is prepared by two independent Turkish game developers sold nearly 1000 copies. It is supposed to reach more gamers when completed. Mobile gaming is gaining popularity among Turkish game developers. In May 2005, FunPac a mobile game company in Turkey, succeeded to sell more than 150.000 copies of XR-Jet Ski game.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Istanbul MMO game (Courtesy of Sobee)

CONCLUSION

In this paper we summarized the game development activities in Turkey. It is very difficult to find references regarding Turkish game development activities. Popular resources such as forums of gaming portals or blogs on the Internet were the most useful resources for this study. Considering these facts it is possible that we missed some information especially before the 1995 term. However we believe that this paper covers most of the game development activities that are worth to mention.

The common point of the games listed from mid 1980s to current day is using national figures and local cultural features in them. As already mentioned, from Keloglan (1989) to Pusu (2005) the developers had always used Turkish Heroes. Even the games in international market contain such Turkish Heroes. However, “Culpa Innata” will be an exemption regarding this issue.

Hancer (The Dagger) carries figures from Ottoman Empire, Tulip Warriors or Istanbul MMO uses many figures of our beautiful city Istanbul. Authentic Turkish folklore and national history of thousands of years will seem to be used by game developers in the future too.

Considering the game development activities as summarized in Table 1, we can say that immature Turkish game industry has a chance to produce more titles in the near future. It is certain that if the current game houses begin to make money, capital owners will make investments to this sector considering many young people who want to be involved in the game business.

Table 1: Summary of Turkish Game Development Activities.

Period	1980s	1990s	2000-2005
Approach	Amateur	Semi-professional	Professional
# of games	1-2	Nearly 10	Nearly 10 professional PC and console game, Dozens of Mobile Games, Dozens of Semi-professional games
Platform	Commodore 64, Spectrum etc.	Amiga, PC	PC, Game Boy, Mobile Devices
Average # of sales	few	100-2500 (Excluding bundled release of Legends of Istanbul)	>5000

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