

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN SPECTRUM DEMOSCENE

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zine
BEHIND THE SCENE

Relations between Soviet Russia and computers were always a bit obscure, especially when it comes to foreign models that were not officially imported here. But, if one wants to trace the roots of the Russian demoscene, especially on the Spectrum, you must dig deep into the 1980's, when the first generation of radio amateurs built their first machines themselves.

CONTRABAND COMPUTERS

The main role in this development was played by a very popular magazine named "Radio", which gathered a lot of talented people through its years of existence. Radio was always trying to invent something, using available elements to bring technology closer to people. By the mid 80's Soviet Russia had various models of computers, but none of them were cheap enough to be affordable for the average Soviet family. Only institutes and other studying facilities had an opportunity to offer computer classes, sponsored by the national budget. In 1983 "Radio" published schematics of the "Micro-80" computer, which became one of the first machines available for people to construct themselves. The main drawback of these schematics was that the package contained a big number of compo-

nents – more than 200 to be precise. This fact complicated the possibility for average Radio readers to build the "Micro-80", because a lot of elements were hard to find in normal stores, and in most cases could only be found on the black market.

A LOT OF ELEMENTS WERE HARD TO FIND IN NORMAL STORES, ONLY ON THE BLACK MARKET

Naturally, some progressive-minded people already knew about home computers in Europe, which everyone could buy. Even the "Iron Curtain" couldn't stop the flow of information about modern technology. Some people already had computers, smuggled across the borders as contraband. In that fashion, the ZX-Spectrum reached Russia more and more, as it was cheaper to buy. By the end of 1984, engineers in several institutes had schematics of this machine and were eagerly trying to copy it, but with using Russian parts only. It was a difficult task because of the ULA chip which created a video image on the display was too complex to hack and copy.

Allegedly, engineers from the Ukrainian city Lvov, were the first to succeed with this challenge and built a working machine in August 1985. Their own designed schematics became very valuable information, so they could trade it to the researchers in other cities for knowledge on other topics. Still, this remained unknown to the wider public and only a limited amount of people actually knew about the existence of a cheap home computer with colourful graphics, which any Radio amateur could easily build at home. For example, in 1986 "Radio" magazine was still publishing the schematics of the Radio-86RK computer, which consisted of 29 parts, but had only a black and white text mode display.

Despite this, it first became a very popular machine in Russia. Some games and utilities started to appear, all done by bedroom programmers. It took two more years until the ZX-Spectrum 48 was produced in facilities in almost every large city. No one ever heard the word "copyright" back then, and producing a hacked English computer was never regarded as a crime. Many manufacturers even took it one step further and changed or optimized schematics and gave the computer the name they wanted. This is how "Dubna", "Moscow", "Leningrad", "Delta" and about 40 more models appeared. Some were very similar to one another. Others contained a lot of changes, and some even had custom built-in RAM routines. For example, they could have a Russian font, debugger,

and turbo loading procedures, losing in the same time some compatibility with original programs that were specifically written for the Spectrum. Software was not a big problem in general, since traders traveled to the socialistic European block countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland. Cracking groups already existed in these countries that also found a way of transmitting cracked software through FM radio channels, so one could easily get programs.

FROM POLAND WITH LOVE

The first Polish demos reached Russia that way. As far as I know, in the beginning of the 1990's some Russian coders decided that they were better than the Polish ones, so they started making demos themselves. While making those simple demos with ripped music from games no one really understood, they were becoming part of something much bigger than just several friends with ZX-Spectrum living in the same city. They didn't know the word "demoscene" at that time, but in fact, they were the first wave of this cultural phenomenon, spreading here a few years later. Very soon the first "Zine" (electronic magazines -ed.) appeared which mainly focused on games and programming. Since there was nothing to crack, because all games were already cracked by guys from Poland, coders started making Russian versions of games and adding intros (introductions) to them. A bit later, when disk in-

terfaces became more common, there was a need to convert tape versions of games to work with TR-DOS.

CRACKING GROUPS FOUND A WAY OF TRANSMITTING CRACKED SOFTWARE THROUGH FM RADIO CHANNELS

This started release-competitions between teams, as already was the case on the Commodore 64.

Some of the really interesting and unique kind of releases were and still are gifts. I never saw such things on other platforms or even in the European Spectrum scene. Those productions were small intros, usually containing one part with some effects, music, graphics, and a long scroll text with wishes and congratulations to the person who had a birthday. I once asked the main coder of the group Flash Inc. who were responsible for starting this massive trend in the beginning of the 90's: "How did you decide to do the first program of this kind?". He replied: "Easy, one of our team members had a birthday, and since we were all students, had no money and couldn't buy a present for him we did this." That's it; those people already carried the main principles of what the demoscene is always about: competition and embodying emotions in software.

PIMP MY SPECTRUM

At this time, when Europe was already attending demoparties, there was nothing like that in Russia. Big distances between cities, and low quality of life, probably were the main reasons for that. Also, the absence of information and cheap communication facilities between Europe and Russia played a significant role. That is why, when cracking activities in Poland calmed down and there were no new programs released after 1993, most of people in Russia thought that they were the only ones using the Spectrum. But the amount of people that were starting to code, compose music, or draw using this machine was still growing, so there was nothing to worry about. Even the appearance of the cheap game console Dendy (the clone of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), an unofficial product in Russia that detracted a lot of gamers from the Spectrum), couldn't stop the creative flow started by this machine. Moreover, some people found a way to connect Dendy's video controller to the Spectrum and then convert cartridge games to diskettes. This filled in during the absence of new Spectrum games from abroad. Also, several other hardware enhancements were developed: covox and sound drive (to play sampled music), modem, and the most important one - the upgrade of 48k Spectrum to 128k with AY music chip, similar to the original ZX Spectrum 128.

Also, as the internet became more and more available, the connection between the global demoscene and its Russian part finally happened. The only problem here was and still is, a language barrier. This reason is still making a lot of sceners not travel to foreign demoparties, plus the quality of life in Russia is far worse than in Europe. Especially when it comes to small cities, so traveling abroad could be hard for many from a financial point of view.

STANDING ON ITS OWN LEGS

By the end of the 20th century it became clear that the era of copied ideas and effects was gone for the Spectrum. Some groups thereby ceased to exist, others released totally dull, uncreative works and then disappeared too. Some started to find new ways of self expression on the Spectrum. It was really hard for them in some cases, because concentrating on visual concepts and emotional content instead of pure technical skills was something that the attendees at demoparties weren't used to, so it happened that some of those demos were not well received. In this context, I'd like to mention a demo by Skrju group named "F*ck You Scene". The name speaks for itself, and the demo was released at the CAFÉ demoparty in 2003. It was filled with highly sensible photos and text, saying that the scene is "deaf, dumb and mute by its own will", because it is rejecting complex emotions, usually carried out by demos of a new wave. Within the next few years, such

demos continued to appear and really showed the face of the demoscene for a lot of us. Political views, emotional experiences, and experimental art are essential parts of contemporary demos today.



*F*ck You Scene by Skrju*

PLEASE STAND UP

Here is the right time to mention groups, who are active in Russia right now, continuing to work with the machine, the specifications of which more than 20 years old by now: CyberPunks Unity, Skrju, Inward, Simbols, Milytia, Triebkraft + 4th Dimension. Even if the number of released demos is not as big as ten years ago, Russia is still the main country when it comes to the Spectrum demoscene. Also, despite a lot of new hardware

upgrades having been developed, the standard machine to release demos for is still the same – the Pentagon 128. Historically, it is the most widespread clone, because of its simplicity

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and the slightly faster speed. Those speed differences always were the main problem for European and UK-users, as they couldn't watch "Pentagon-only" demos in full scale. Now, it is a good standard to make demos compatible with the original Spectrum and several other of the most popular clones. Also, one of the main problems for those who want to watch demos on original hardware is to find it. You surely can buy the Spectrum 128, but the Pentagon is much harder to find in good condition. There are some efforts in this direction done by several people and especially by Zhabin Alexey (King of Evil), who is developing a new motherboard using modern parts and adding some useful upgrades, compatible with old demos, done for this machine. So, in the future we can expect demos, using new devices (sound, memory, video modes), along with works for the original Spectrum.