

# IT'S NOT JUST A PLATFORM GAME, IT'S AN ADVENTURE: The European Invention of the Action-Adventure Game 1983-1990

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Was the action-adventure game was invented in Europe? This presentation argues that much of 1980s European home computer game history was an extended development of an action- adventure tradition predating later games such as Nintendo's *Metroid*. Both home computer and European video game history is often forgotten (Navarro-Remesal and Pérez-Latorre 2021, 15) and this presentation aims to recover the particularly central history of the action-adventure game.

While the combination of action and exploration is among the dominant video game types today, [Table 1](#) show how it was initially an entirely counterintuitive combination, with different platform origins, business models, time, and activities. How could they ever be merged?

	Adventure game	Action game
<b>Origin</b>	Mainframe computers	Arcades
<b>Business model</b>	Open source, then pay up front	Pay per game session
<b>Time</b>	No time pressure	Time pressure
<b>Primary activity</b>	Solving puzzles / Exploration	Moving quickly to avoid danger along defined paths

Table 1: Adventure and action games



Figure 1: *Manic Miner* (Software Projects 1983)

The distinct European action game tradition can be said to begin with Matthew Smith's highly successful 1983 *Manic Miner* (Figure 1) a brutally difficult game for the ZX Spectrum, converted to the C64 and other platforms, and relating to the coalminers' strike of the time (Wade 2016, 129). *Manic Miner* consists of 20 levels ("screens"), each of which requires the collection of objects to unlock an exit before "air" runs out.

Though *Manic Miner* was similar to arcade games like *Donkey Kong* by providing only three lives and restarting after the completion of the final level, users began to discuss *Manic Miner* as if it could be completed. A review said that, "One of the qualities which make a game a winner is whether you'll keep coming back for more. *Manic Miner* scores well here as it will *take some time to complete*" (Computers C Video Games 1983, my emphasis). Though designed as an arcade game with indefinite playtime, *Manic Miner* thus came to be seen an adventure-type game that could be completed.



Figure 2: Wanted Monty Mole (Crowther 1984)

The *Monty Mole* series, starting with the 1984 *Wanted: Monty Mole* (Figure 2) shows how this combination of action with a completable game of exploration became entrenched both in design and rhetorically. Like in the *Manic Miner* follow-up *Jet Set Willy* (1984), *Wanted: Monty Mole* incorporated from adventure games exploration and the possibility of completing the game, and changed the platform genre to be a game about non-linear exploration of a world, rather than a linear set of screens. The developers were aware that this needed explanation, and the C64 version title screen instructed players to "REMEMBER ITS NOT JUST A PLATFORM GAME ITS AN ADVENTURE" (Crowther 1984).

The idea of combining action and adventure games is often ascribed to the 1980 *Adventure* for the Atari 2600 (Montfort and Bogost 2009, chap. 3), but the combination of platform games and exploration was much later named *MetroidVania* (Oliveira et al. 2020) from the 1986 *Metroid* and *Castlevania* games for the Nintendo Entertainment System, but these came out several years after the games I am discussing here.

Home computer and console traditions were almost entirely separate in the mid-1980s, and Europe's early video game tradition was partially separate from that of the US and Japan, with Nintendo's consoles having limited success in Europe in the 1980s and 90s (Juul and Carney 2023). In the presentation I will expand on European development of the action-adventure genre, and on why this European tradition is now seemingly forgotten.

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