

“Amis and Euros.” Software Import and Contacts Between European and American Cracking Scenes

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Abstract

This article explores practices of so-called “software import” between Europe and the US by the Commodore 64 cracking scene and reflects on how it was related to the establishment and expression of cultural identities of its members. While discussing the establishment of computer games’ transatlantic routes of distribution with Bulletin Board System (BBS) boards, I will explore how this phenomenon, providing the sceners with new challenges and, subsequently, new roles such as importer, modem trader or NTSC-fixer, influenced the rise of new cultural identities within the cracking scene. Furthermore, I will analyze how the import of software and the new scene roles influenced the expression of cultural distinction between American and European sceners, referred to as “Euros” and “Amis” on the scene forum.

Keywords: Europe, United States, crackers, cultural identity, modem, software piracy

Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide a historical inquiry into cultural practices related to the so called “software import” between Europe and the US, within the framework of the Commodore 64 cracking scene. In the mid-1980s several crackers from European countries and the US established direct and regular contacts with the computer modem Bulletin Board System (BBS) boards. In the existing studies the cracking scene is considered primarily as a social world of crackers (Vuorinen 2007), a particular form of hacker culture (Thomas 2003; Sterling 1992). This study intends to broaden the existing academic work by considering how the transatlantic circulation of cracked software and its appropriation influenced the establishment of cultural identities. For the sake of this article, I will consider the transatlantic software import as a form of “circulation of commodities in social life” within the cracking scene (Appadurai 1986, 8). While doing so, I will explore two interdependent aspects of such social life related to the transatlantic import of software considered

as a primary “commodity”. The first one is the emergence of the new cracking scene roles such as importers, modem traders, BBS sysops (Bulletin Board System board administrators), and TV signal fixers known as PAL- (Phase Alternating Line) and NTSC (National Television System Committee)-fixers. The second aspect of the cracking scene’s social life that I will further analyze is manifestation of the belonging to the European or American scenes on the scene forum.

Security gaps which came up after the AT&T divestiture in 1984 enabled American “phreaks” (Lapsey 2013) who were experimenting with obtaining free access to telephone lines to establish frequent connections with European crackers. Members of cracking scenes from both regions established “import groups” aimed at importing software from the other side of the Atlantic. Software artifacts circulated by import groups were not only made physically available but were also adapted to the local TV signal system with “PAL“ or “NTSC fix” Software import also influenced contacts between two different hacker cultures: the consolidated European cracking scene of the 1980s and the heterogeneous American hacker cultures with both cracking and hacking/phreaking (H/P) scenes.

The practice of cracking, that is the appropriation of a software object and transforming it into a scene artifact (Vuorinen 2007), can be considered as an instance of “commoditization” (Kopytoff 1986) in which a generic object becomes a commodity with some new values relevant for the particular community. For the members of the scene, software import between the US and Europe was a further step in the commoditization. It meant that software had to be physically moved across the Atlantic with a modem and adapted to local TV signal systems. Such processes of commoditization became practices and further challenges. Rehn (2004) explained the mechanism of competition and challenge as a social structure that defines the internet warez scene, but his analysis is also relevant for the pre-internet cracking scene:

The scene is through this permanently engaged in a circle of challenges, a tournament where the reputation/honor of the participants is tied to their ability of keeping up with the competition. Consequently, participants are continuously recounting their history of releasing (i.e. participation), and working hard to maintain status. (Rehn 2004, 366.)

I will show below how the expansion of such logic of tournaments shaped the transatlantic software trade. The establishment of import groups was influenced by the prestige competition within the cracking scene, in which both the import and sending of cracked software outside the local milieus were considered as a significant merit. Such contacts also made the crackers express their opinions

on other members of the exchange network through numerous articles in scene disk magazines. While reading sources produced by crackers themselves, I was struck by the frequent use of the word “European,” often abbreviated as “Euro”, used in relation to a member of a cracking scene from one of the European countries. The study of relations between “Amis” and “Euros” helps us to understand how members of the cracking scene shaped their cultural identities with reference to some broader values related to American or European culture.

This article is divided in three parts. In the first part I will discuss historical trajectory of the rise and demise of the transatlantic software import. I will also explore how the possibilities and constraints of information and communication technologies of the 1980s influenced the establishment of transatlantic software import. The second part covers the establishment of several new scene roles and cultural identities due to challenges related to the software import and fixing. The third part reflects on the role that the software import played in the shaping of cultural identities of the members of hacker cultures from the US and European countries. Discussions in crackers’ disk magazines concerning the practices of software cracking, import and calling the other side of Atlantic show how young computer users conceptualized the identities of “Europeans” and “Americans”. My historical inquiry includes content analysis of disk magazines, personal testimonies and interviews, as well as analysis of imported software artifacts. However, any study of American hacker culture of the 1980s encounters a serious difficulty. The forum of the European cracking scene were disk magazines which are carefully preserved in several online collections. The American scene included mostly BBS electronic communities (Sterling 1992). Documents circulated on BBS boards were ephemeral and are scarcely preserved. Only very limited number of BBS sources are preserved as “textfiles” archive (<http://textfiles.com/>). While writing this article, I studied the available crack intros released by American groups and very scarce American diskmags. Still, due to the vast availability of European sources compared to very limited number of American sources, this essay may seem to be one-sided.

Establishment and Demise of Transatlantic Import Routes

To understand the development of software import groups within the framework of the C-64 cracking scene, it is necessary to take under consideration a broader perspective of the home computer market of the 1980s. The C-64 introduced in 1982 was the first affordable home computer which became a market success in both the US and numerous countries in Western Europe (Bagnall 2011). Other hardware platforms were popular in specific countries or regions. For instance, the Apple II became a success only in the US while the ZX Spectrum only in the UK and in some

countries of continental Europe. The popularity of the C-64 caused a quick growth of the software industry dedicated to this platform. The general context of the rise of recreational software market in that time was discussed by Martin Campbell-Kelly (2003, 269-301). In the 1980s home computer software industry, which was mostly publishing games, primarily included small companies with limited organizational and financial capacities not only related to conducting overseas marketing campaigns but even production of material copies of software. The growth of large software publishers began only in the next decade. In the early 1980s small companies had simply not enough resources and funds to enter foreign markets. In the US C-64 games were published by US Gold, Ocean, Electronic Arts (a small company at that time) and Microprose. In the UK games were published by Codemasters, Mastertronic and Virgin Games. Aside from the UK market, those companies distributed games in few other European countries only. According to some crackers, not only different games were published in the two regions, but European games had a different style. As Mitch from Eagle Soft Inc. (ESI), the most significant US import group (Figure 1), claimed: “What the Europeans got out of the SID and VIC-II (C-64 sound and graphics chips) [...] some amazing demos, some amazing graphics. American games always had better game play [...] but Euro games looked cool.” (Interview with Mitch in Jazzcat 2006.)



Figure 1. Eagle Soft Inc. crack intro, 1987.

There was a significant technical constraint which influenced the lack of overseas marketing strategies. American C-64 was provided with a graphic chipset with an output display in NTSC television system standard, and the one available in Europe was adapted to PAL system, which differs from NTSC in the amount of displayed horizontal lines and television signal frequency. Computer games which extensively used advanced graphic display capacities of the C-64 were

written for a specific display output. To run a game designed for a particular signal system on a TV set based on the other system, some extensive and time-consuming modifications were required. The lack of interest of software companies in foreign market as well as PAL-NTSC differences will have serious side-effects for the further competition in PAL and NTSC game fixing among crackers.

From the early 1980s the cracking scenes in Europe and the US were growing separately. European cracking scene is currently extensively documented by the Demoscene Research project, while American cracking scene is scarcely documented (Polgár 2008, 116-128). The only critical volume on American hacker culture (Thomas 2003) covers only hacking/phreaking (H/P) scene. As the memoir of Rob O'Hara (2011) shows, cracking and H/P scenes were overlapping, since the members of both cultures appropriated the BBS system as a basic infrastructure for information and software circulation, whereas in Europe snail mail was used by crackers until the late 1980s.

Contacts between crackers from Europe and the US were established in 1984-1985 when it became possible to phreak international calls after the AT&T divestiture in 1984 (Henck and Strassburg 1988; Mercer 2006, 95-103). The Commodore Scene Database (CSDb, <http://csdb.dk/>) data show the beginning and the quick growth of both import groups as well as NTSC-PAL fixing in 1985. The CSDb data show that during the 1980s in the US there were at least 168 import groups of which the essential activity would be importing pirate software from Europe. The most important American import groups were the ESI and the North East Crackers. It was common that such groups had well-thought-out names, with references to American culture or parodying corporate names, for instance: Supreme Importers Incorporated, Rowdy American Distributors, United Network of International Exchange, Kentucky Fried Importerz, Looney Tunes Importers, Hot Importing Team or Major Imports of America. It is difficult to estimate the number of such groups in European countries since, for example, a German import group might be importing software from the US or from the UK. According to the CSDb, games published by US companies were often distributed by European cracking scene groups shortly after the official release date in the US. In an interview, Jon, an American importer, talked about the volume of software imported by this exchange network.

I think we brought over more, by volume, from Europe. Import groups would often release 3-4 games per day. However, I think that US releases were brought over multiple times by Europeans. Sometimes ESI (Eagle Soft Inc.) games would be brought over multiple times by several European groups. (E-mail interview with Jon, Feb. 1, 2014.)

In the late 1980s several European high profile cracking groups used American BBS boards as the so called “group HQ (Headquarters) BBS” – a board where released crack was uploaded and further circulated among other groups. European elite groups such as Ikari + Talent used popular board Warez Castle established in 1987 (Interview with Wares King, *Sex’n’Crime*, Issue 13, 1990). Such boards were used to spread cracks much faster via snail mail, so such distribution provided the group with an advantage in the scene’s prestige game. After 1990, when American telecommunication companies started the “hacker crackdown” (Sterling 1992) and blocked the most exploited security gaps, some phreaking techniques were developed in Europe^{1[1]}. At the same time, the whole phenomenon of C-64 import groups started to disappear along with the demise of the hardware platform and the appropriation of the Amiga (Maher 2012) as the main platform for the scene activities. Transatlantic software trade within the framework of the cracking scene lasted for about seven years. Arguably, it was the most sophisticated and widespread system of grass-roots circulation of software with the use of information and communication technologies before the dissemination of the Internet-based platforms and the rise of the Internet warez scene (Rehn 2004).

Import Groups and New Scene Roles

CSDb together with crackers list other scene roles such as importer, modem trader, sysop, PAL and NTSC fixer. All aforementioned roles became considered within the scene as separate tournaments with relevant sections in the form of “charts” published regularly in disk magazines. While discussing “imagined communities” Benedict Anderson excellently pointed out the essence of belonging to an imagined community:

An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (Anderson 1991, 31.)

To paraphrase this sentence, the belonging to an imagined community of “import groups” was based on the confidence that there is an ongoing competition within the import scene and one has to provide steady software import and fix new software releases as fast as possible. Rehn discussed how the imagined scene with constant competition with other groups provides a framework and a point of reference for its members.

¹ For an overview of European phreaking, see *The Real Info’s About Blue Boxing in Europe & Other Countries!*, 1991, <http://www.textfiles.com/phreak/BLUEBOXING/eurobbox.txt>.

The individual releases gain their symbolic values by being part of a group's total releasing as compared to the actions of other groups [...] and it is the valuation of the total releasing prowess of a group that establishes their social standing. (Rehn 2004, 368.)

In the late 1980s "releasing prowess" was related not only to cracking but also to several practices related to software import. The software itself was a commodity which was supposed to be manipulated in order to be accessed by others on BBSes, thus counted as "import release". Jon explained that the quality of games didn't really matter since it was merely a commodity, and a group would get a score not for the quality of the game itself but rather for the number of imported software.

I preferred American wares. Some of the games coming out of Europe were really quite good.... I could list off a lot of European games that I enjoyed, but there was a lot of garbage coming in as well. Our importers were dragging everything from Europe over here. There were a lot of budget titles as well. For every *Ikari Warriors*, there were two or three *Intergalactic Cage Matches*. Some of them were so laughably bad that I was amazed when I discovered that they were actually commercially released.... But for the most part, wares were wares. (E-mail interview with Jon, Feb. 1, 2014.)

All manipulations, such as fast import, NTSC or PAL fixing and providing access to it on a HQ BBS run by a group, were defined by the scene as activities with a socially relevant value. The logic of the scene – a community for which the competition was the core value – caused that every activity related to the software circulation could be considered as a challenge. A memoir of a Swedish scener shows how the rise of import groups in the late 1980s was a strategy aimed to "differentiate" from already established pan-European system of software circulation.

The only question that was left how can we get faster than before? Sending envelopes across Europe and typing cool greeting-lists is good but how can we further differentiate? Some of the groups were looking over the great ocean at the land of opportunities: the USA. The USA was an untapped market that was missing out on most of the releases. I remembered swapping with people in the US back in 1985, sending games they'd never see. NTSC-fixing was not part of releasing back then, so I never understood how they could enjoy some of the games I sent them. The USA also

had a software-scene, with several releases coming out from giant companies. You all know them. The Activisions, the Microproses and the Cinemawares, bringing out giant games These were all great, groundbreaking games that needed to find a European haven, just like the European games needed to find an American one. In short the scene was up for a new conquest establishing fast, solid distribution-channels across the Atlantic. ... There was no BBS'es initially so it was one-on-one trading, then the leaving it up to the American swappers or European swappers to secure proper distribution. (Newscopy 2006.)

For American sysops who were running their own BBSes, becoming a HQ for European group was apparently also the “to differentiate” strategy. O’Hara in his memoirs showed how important among American BBS scene was to have some contacts outside local area code (O’Hara 2011, 49-59). American scene was divided into such local BBS area code communities because of the prohibitive costs of long distance calls and modem connections. O’Hara clearly showed how prestigious was to have some contacts outside, which meant having an access to games unavailable locally. In such context sysops looked for an opportunity to establish contacts with European groups also to obtain European games, to have users from Europe and to gain prestige as “Euro hotspot”. Wares King, the Wares Castle BBS sysop in an interview emphasized his interest in running BBS for high profile European groups.

Q: When I read the user-list of your board I can see that there are sooo many Europeans! Can you explain why?

A: Yes, it’s the Euro hotspot... And most of these Euros call because I have been HQ for so many good Euro groups. (Interview with Wares King, 1990.)

In the late 1980s import became recognized as one of the “tournaments of value” on the scene (Rehn, 2004). Firstly, the imported games were provided with a second “import intro” including the date of importing software along with the original crack release date. Both the name of the group which provided import and the one who fixed it were included there. Moreover, several European diskmag, such as *Mamba*, included new rankings related to import in “charts” section such as “best euro-importers” and “best u.s.bbs’s” (*Mamba*, Issue 8, 1990). As magazine editors claimed, they were publishing “the all-american-charts from point of view by the europeans (top 10)” (*Mamba*, issue 9, 1990). Unfortunately, there are no records which could indicate that Americans were making any similar judgments on the European crackers and importers.

The practice of software importing became included in the scene's competition for the quickest crack release. In a cracked and imported game, both dates of crack and import were given as the date of game release. Moreover, such game was provided with both an original crack intro and an import intro added later on. One of such import intros included not only "Euro greets" but also a world map with flashing points in the US and in Northwestern Europe, which shows a spatial location of American and European groups' contacts (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. R-Type import intro, United Software Association (USA) 03, 1988. Source: <http://intros.c64.org/>

In some sources I have found statements claiming that in the time of American HQ BBSes for European groups, the day when the game was uploaded was considered the scene as the crack release. As *Mamba* editors stated: "the first 100% crack in the states counts, if a game need some days to be fixed, i count the first version sent by modem to the u.s. !" (*Mamba*, Issue 7, 1990). However, it is difficult to confirm if such rule was generally accepted among the whole cracking scene. The complexity of distribution and import of cracked software caused a problem from the point of view of the scene's cultural values. The guide on crack scoring system in the *Mamba* magazine, which tried to provide crackers with a clear set of rules for its chart, gives us an excellent picture of such confusion.

note that the euro-crack and the ami-import will be treated as 'one thing', that means the european group has to suffer if the importer group messes the release up, and the other way round. that also means that the american group and the european group will

get 3 points for a proper release each, 2 points for a second fixed release etc, indifferent whose fault it was or why... (*Mamba*, Issue 20, 1991.)

The spread of the software import apparently caused confusion. Who should gain more prestige from software commoditization? The one who cracked a game? Or rather the one who successfully managed to import a game through transatlantic route? On the one hand, it shows that importing became a part of the scene's prestige game and importers and fixers became recognized as equal to crackers members of the scene. On the other hand, it shows that the scene constantly negotiated its rules of the "tournaments of value".

"Euros" and "Amis"

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, software was primarily considered as a commodity of which an exchange permitted a member of the exchange network to gain prestige in his own milieu. But how the establishment of the contacts between European American scenes influenced mutual perception of both communities? The case of software import touches the more general issue of interdependence of American and European computer cultures. In his recent paper, Frank Veraart (2014) discusses the impact of American hobby computing culture on the activities of the Dutch Hobby Computer Club. The case of the software import shows different trajectory of the development of contacts between Europe and the US. In the mid-1980s crackers from several countries of Northwestern Europe established a common cultural space and "the scene" referred to as a pan-European social structure. One of the most striking instances of such community is the appearance of "eurochart" – a ranking of crackers from the whole region. If the scene was defined by the eurocharts, then how the practices of American crackers could be incorporated into it? While browsing several disk magazines I have found that only *Mamba* regularly published both eurocharts and rankings of the American scene. However, in Issue 5 even *Mamba* editors claimed that they cease publishing American charts due to the lack of votes. There are no instances of high profile magazines which would publish a single chart in which members of both scenes would be mentioned together.

Transatlantic software exchange was commented in several European disk mags. From the point of view of a cracking scene's researcher, such discussions provide an interesting testimony on the rise of self-consciousness of the European scene of which the members, while expressing their opinions on Americans, juxtapose them with the "Euroscene" – an imagined community with several positive features. In the late 1980s several disk mags included short stories on the American scene

and interviews with American crackers with a typical set of questions on differences between the States and Europe. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find any records of discussions on this matter on American BBS boards. Scarce American diskmags included few sections with “euro update”. However, this section was rather ephemeral. Editor of *Insight* disk magazine explained why it disappeared from the magazine in Issue 2: “If you don’t see the euro update selection on the menu anymore, it is because we are not receiving enough info to put it on” (*Insight*, Issue 2, 1991). Another American cracker in his short article in European *CCCP* paper magazine on the currents in the US desperately asked for feedback: “So, what’s the European trading scene like? [...] what else goes on? And what’s your ranking for Usa groups? Write2me?” (Vision (JAY), The American scene, *CCCP*, Issue 5, 1989, 2).

When members of the European scene were commenting on Americans in diskmags, it was usually a list of complaints. Apparently, the aim of such elaborate complaints was to demonstrate the cultural capital of European crackers juxtaposed with inferior Americans who were not only unable to appreciate high quality cracks, but also lacked social skills while calling to Europe. Highly influential *Illegal* paper magazine included several elaborate claims on American cultural inferiority.

AMERICANS, only mentioning their names make me shiver, they’re the loudest, most waste people in the world, they think EUROPEANS still are around in animal-skins and live in tents. They used to be such a boy to get on the phone, they could arrange conferences... but when you think of it, you only spoke to your European friends which you had your American slave to call. Nowadays American groups consider themselves to be one of the world’s top 20 if they import a game every day. GIVE ME A BREAK! Nothing is so easy, as to receive something through a modem and put an intro on it [...] they have completely spoiled our 64 scene, now THANKX to the YANKS everybody wants the game super-fast, they don’t even look at the game, they just bang their intro on it [...]. They have changed the way we EUROPEANS think, nowadays a lot of groups (no names) just make a fast low-quality crack just to send it to the states. (MAD ALL, I HATE AMERICANS!, *Illegal*, Issue 29, 1988.)

Similar statements were published in *Illegal* and other high profile journals several times. Discussing the differences between the sophisticated rules of the European scene and Americans who only want to get new software as soon as possible, played a role of expression of cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984) for the European scene members. Typical disk magazine interviews

with sceners would include a question on contacts between Europe and the US. Below are two examples of interviews from the same issue of *Mamba*.

Q: what do u think about americanos?

A: most americans are right assholes! (Interview with bod/ikari & talent, *Mamba*, Issue 6, 1990.)

Q: what do you think about americanos/euros ?

A: i heard that most amis aren't able to fix euro-games, in europe are more capable people ! (Interview with chrysagon/x-ray, *Mamba*, Issue 6, 1990.)

Dozens of interviews from that time include similar statements. It is possible to conclude that this question and its predictable answer became a part of the scene's ritual of manifestation of cultural distinction based on the belonging to European scene. Another scener recalled this as a general attitude towards American sceners at that time.

I must admit I kept the usual European arrogant attitude, which means, I couldn't care less about the importers and the BBS's except perhaps a very, very, very few. Many other Europeans just felt the same way about Americans in general. (Interview with Antitrack, 2006.)

Below is a claim from a memoir of another scener with a clearly expressed crucial distinction between imagined Americans who cared only about the speed, not the quality, and Europeans who respected the rules of "quality releases".

Q: What do you think is the biggest difference between an American scener and a European scener?

A: An American scener cares about boards and first releases and doesn't care about quality versions. A European scener cares more about getting a good version of the game that works and got a lot of trainers. Also they are known for having a lot of mail contacts. (Interview with Mason, 2002, *Vandalism News*, Issue 39.)

This explicit comparison between quality juxtaposed with quantity and fastness, has to be put in broader cultural contexts. As Victoria de Grazia showed in *Irresistible Empire* (2005) there was a

unique *Hass/Liebe* relationship between the US and European countries in the the 20th century. The aforementioned juxtaposition excellently fits into the notion of difference between American culture of Taylorist production and fast-foods, and European tradition of paying attention to the quality, in this case to “quality releases”.

Remarkably, there are no similar derogative and generalized statements on the sceners from particular European countries. Crackers from Europe’s peripheries who actively tried to establish some contacts with high profile groups from Western Europe by asking to send them new releases without offering anything in exchange, were referred to as “lamers”. However, there are no statements that there are “Italian” or “Hungarian” lamers. They were mostly criticized as individuals since the scene’s understanding of “lamer” concerns some personal traits, not a national stereotype. Americans, as we have seen above, were mostly criticized in a different way, as an imagined community juxtaposed with the imagined, self-conscious community of “Euro” sceners.

Conclusion

In this article I discussed how the C-64 users from the cracking scene established transatlantic software import routes and how this phenomenon influenced cultural identities of the sceners. Considering the practices of the cracking scene as a form of commoditization and asking what cultural values were related to the particular commoditization stages, we can understand better how the scene was determined by a constant struggle for new challenges and “tournaments”. In the mid-1980s cracking scene, which included members from several countries of Northwestern Europe, managed “to differentiate”. This article showed how the stages coming after cracking – importing and fixing – provided members of the scene with the possibilities of new cultural identities by participating in relevant imagined communities. Charts from disk magazines provide interesting accounts on the scene’s cultural history, in which new scene roles were put into separate charts but always labelled European either American.

The circulation of cracked software was expanded to the US to seek both new sources of software and new partners for the reception of the software from Europe. This expansion caused the rise of a new category of “import groups” which became a significant part of the scene’s landscape of the late 1980s. This case shows that the exploration of possible channels for distribution of cracked software and obtaining software unavailable locally was a crucial factor in the geographical spread of the scene in the whole Northwestern Europe and other European regions, and further in the US.

Taking into consideration the relations between European and American crackers we can better understand how the cracking scene formed the imagined “Euroscene”. Numerous claims on the cultural capital of crackers from Europe and the lack of thereof among Americans provide us with unique accounts of a European-wide cultural community built rather from the bottom than as a result of top political agendas of the European Economic Community states.

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