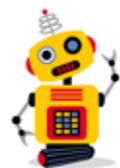# THE UNCONSOLED

BY DERRICK SOBODASH

Originally unaffordable, now technically illegal, video-games systems have their own unique history in China. Here we celebrate two decade of home entertainment you probably missed

When Nintendo released the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1985, it single-handedly revolutionized the video-game industry. But while the eight-bit box spread like wildfire through Japanese- and English-speaking markets, in China it struggled to register double digit sales. With the average family earning around RMB50 (then around USD16), owning a RMB450 (USD149.99) NES would have meant going without food for a year.

For more than 25 years, Japan and the US have defined the world of video games. Almost every major global franchise, from *Super Mario Bros.* to *The Sims*, has come out of these two countries. Yet China's gamers enjoyed a quiet revolution of their own during the 1990s and early 2000s – one largely overlooked in the West.

Spurning the usual American tropes for intrinsically Chinese elements, like the world of *wuxia* — the imaginative setting of China's popular 'swordsman' fiction – and with a *laissez-faire* approach to copyright law, China has produced a gaming catalogue that's as vast as it is fascinating, and as (often) silly as it is unique.

The industry explosion can be traced back to the late 1980s, as Famicom systems (as the Japanese called the NES) began to trickle into China, often as gifts from family and friends returning from abroad. It wasn't long before the system — known as *Hongbaiji* or 'Red-and-white machine' in Chinese — was being cloned by factories in Shenzhen and Taiwan.

To this day, these 'Famiclones' remain the most popular consoles in Chinese history: by some estimates, as many as half of urban households had a Famicom-compatible copycat machine by the mid-1990s.

One of its first manufacturers was SUBOR (or Xiaobawang), founded in 1987, which aggressively rolled out nationwide TV campaigns extolling the virtues of its "study machines": Famicom hardware in keyboards bundled with a suite of educational cartridges. Of course, far more time was spent playing with friends than memorizing equations.

The first games were all copies of Japanese releases, often with Chinese-language title screens and new levels. Namco's *Battle City* (1985), a basic tank-combat game modified with new maps, led the charge, with *Super Mario Bros.* and *Contra* (1987) close behind, the latter spawning two unofficial sequels from Yanshan and E.S.C.

But these early-era NES adaptations weren't enough to satisfy the growing number of "digital heroin addicts," as China's conservative media primly labeled gamers. Domestic software houses swiftly rose to the challenge, led by Sachen, a Taiwanese developer that began producing NES titles in late 1988. Within a year, it had published 11. C&E Inc, another Taiwan-based firm, released the first Chinese RPG, *Tale of the Holy Flame,* for the NES in 1991. A *wuxia* tale set in the twilight years of the Yuan Dynasty, when the Holy Flame Society forms to resist the tyrannical final Yuan emperor, the game established a tradition of selectively plundering China's 5,000-year history that thrives to this day.

It was not until 1993, however, that a mainland outfit, Fujian startup Waixing Science & Technology, began to publish games. The company would go on to produce over 100 titles, including the first to sell over 150,000 – a platformer predictably called (and based on) *Journey to the West*.

By the end of the decade, however, SUBOR's so-called study machines were yesterday's news. As retailers began stocking Sega's new Saturn and Sony's PlayStation (PS) consoles, a panicked industry began hemorrhaging money. Desperate to develop new platforms, Waixin ploughed investment into *Legend of Chivalrous Aspirations*, a PC production that bombed

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despite two years in development. The company even began suing rival brands for copyright infringement – a bold move, considering Waixing owed most of its prior success to stealing from the Japanese.

ENTER THE MODEM

Today, you can still find Famiclones in poorer parts of the countryside. Pirate outfits churned out multi-game cartridges throughout the 2000s for between RMB10-20 and some developers were still making new games more than a decade after the last official NES title, but in the first-tier cities these are now considered shamefully low-tech.

While developers and pirates waged war, some followed another route: the IBM PC. Personal computers had come within reach of urban populations in the early 1990s, when stores would build a 386-compatible for RMB9,000 (then about USD1,720).

Softstar, now Taiwan's largest PC publisher, was first on the scene in 1989. *Rich Man*, a *Monopoly*-like game, was released on numerous platforms, with the latest edition currently bound for the North American online market.

The first PC-based RPG is more difficult to pin down: likely contenders are Softstar's *Xuanyuan Sword*, Soft World's *The Eight Swords of Shenzhou* or Kingformation's *Legend of the Chivalrous Heroes*.

In Japan, developers drew on RPG-style novels (and the Western games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, inspired by them) to build fantasy worlds that tossed together all manner of characters, creatures and classes into a Tolkien-inspired world.

China went the opposite route.

Nearly every Chinese RPG drew on history and contemporary fiction, especially *wuxia*, giving even the most generic game a uniquely Chinese cultural color.

In the US, the 1997 release of *Final Fantasy VII* sparked an RPG frenzy: multiply that by approximately one-point-two billion to grasp the effect Softstar's *Legend of the Swordsman & Fairy* (1995; aka Chinese *Paladin*) had on gamers here.

The title had it all: fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, monsters, chases, escapes and unrequited love, all packed into a rock-solid isometric engine. But beyond its technical achievements, *Swordsman & Fairy* had serious heart in its storytelling that was easily equal to, and often even better than, those found in Japanese equivalents.

The game was later remade for Windows with full CD audio, then ported to the Saturn as one of the platform's few Chinese releases, going on to become the first Chinese game to make the leap to Japan under the name *Senken Kikyouden*. Softstar itself rebooted the game with high-resolution graphics for Windows XP; pirates duly created *shanzhai* (fake) versions for every platform under the sun.

Yet within a few years, PC games were not proving to be the cash cows that had been anticipated. As an avalanche of low-budget, "me-too" titles flooded the market, gamers turned away even from pirated copies and the number of original PC games made in China fell from 250 in 2001 to 35 in 2006.

The last decade saw many of the top Chinese developers abandoning their flagship single-player series in favor of more profitable online editions. Today, with the exception of a few long-running series by major publishers, China's PC market is limited to online gaming.

And despite 20 years of domestic success, only a handful of Chinese-made games have made it to US shores, while fewer than 10 have made it to Japan and Korea, China's closest cultural neighbor.

"Speaking frankly, Chinese game development started late," says Li Peimin, president of developer Kingformation. "The graphics and programming quality lagged far behind the US and Japan."

A lack of tech know-how saw developers tethered to hardware over which they had little control, and which was rarely if

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ever officially supported in their region. An attempt at a purely Chinese console – Taiwan's Super A'can, a kind of souped-up Neo-Geo – proved a huge flop despite the goodwill of developers. Many firms showed a patriotic eagerness to see a domestic console success, says Owen Lin, a spokesman for AV Artisan, which developed *Speedy Dragon* for the A'can.

"Both gamers and the press gave us positive feedback," Lin recalls. "Probably because it was developed completely in Taiwan. They had very high hopes."

However, creator Funtech Entertainment was forced to recall unsold units, which ended up being dismantled and the scraps shipped to Shenzhen for recycling.

Added to that, many games suffered from an even-deeper problem: they were too Chinese.

"Chinese games tend to follow the same storyline progression as Japanese and Western games, but they heavily emphasize Chinese culture," Li says. "The background is so strong that it's difficult for Japan, or Western countries, to get into."

And then there's piracy, a topic that always looms in the background of nearly everything game-related. Not only did developers in the region have to compete with a thriving bootleg industry that Asian governments mostly ignored, but espionage was rife.

In one extreme example, a disgruntled employee walked out of C&E's offices with the source code to its *Super Fighter* and sold it to Panda Entertainment, located across the street. That game ultimately became the wildly popular *Sango Fighter*, a *Three Kingdoms*-themed 2D fighting game.

While C&E did successfully sue Panda, that did little to stop the dozens of shops that were already creating more illegal copies of *Sango Fighter*.

Such market idiosyncrasies, along with supposed cultural barriers, has prevented foreign firms from taking much interest in the market.

Take for, example, Google: their ongoing row with the Chinese government has left its Android ecosystem woefully fragmented. Google does not support the Google Play market in China, nor does it allow the necessary software to ship on Chinese phones, prohibiting Chinese users who gain access to Google Play from making any purchases. In its place are a handful of domestic markets backed by big names in Chinese online gaming such as Shanda and NetDragon, as well as venture capitalists like Kai-Fu Lee, formerly of Google China.

But this fragmentation has left Android developers in China with few ways to profit from their games, other than displaying irritating banner ads, leaving many developers to focus on foreign markets before tackling the PRC.

Whether these creations will retain the traits that made the past 20 years of Chinese games so uniquely endearing, though, remains to be seen.