

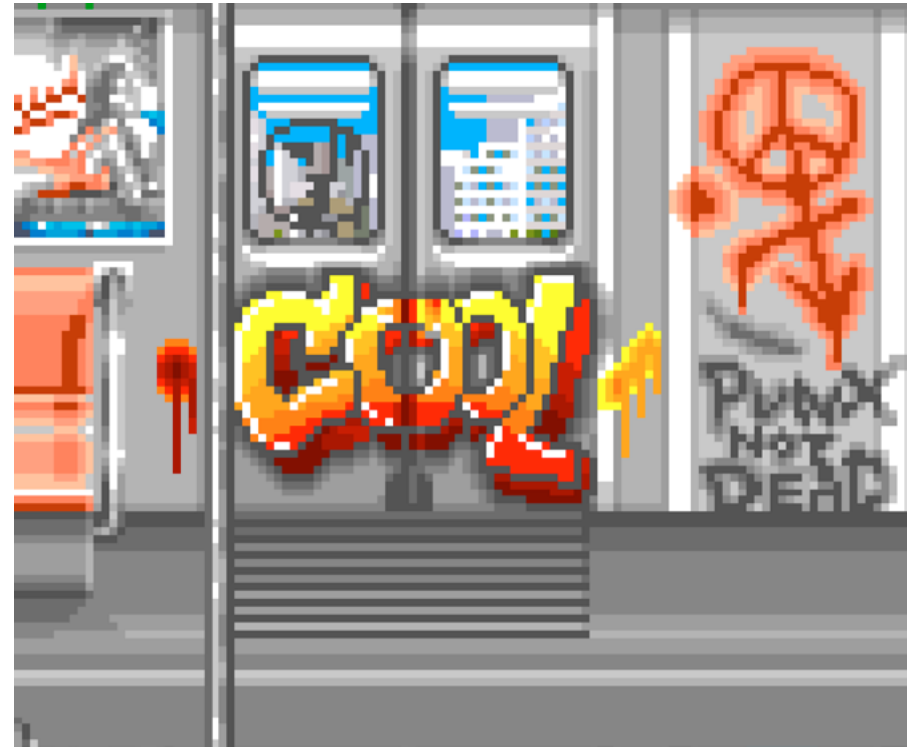
# *Digital Graffiti*

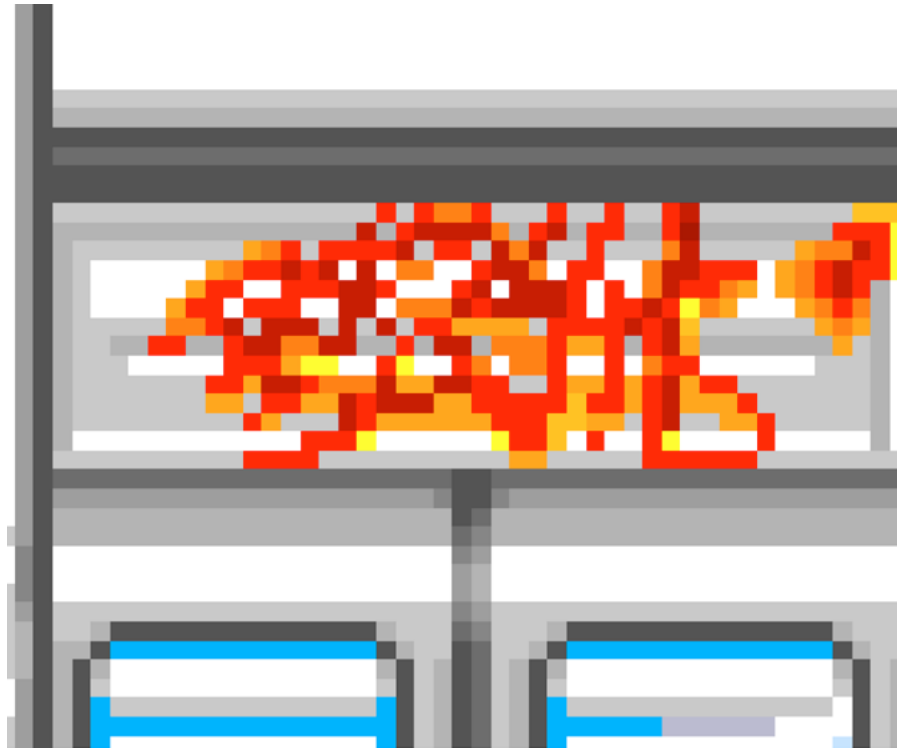


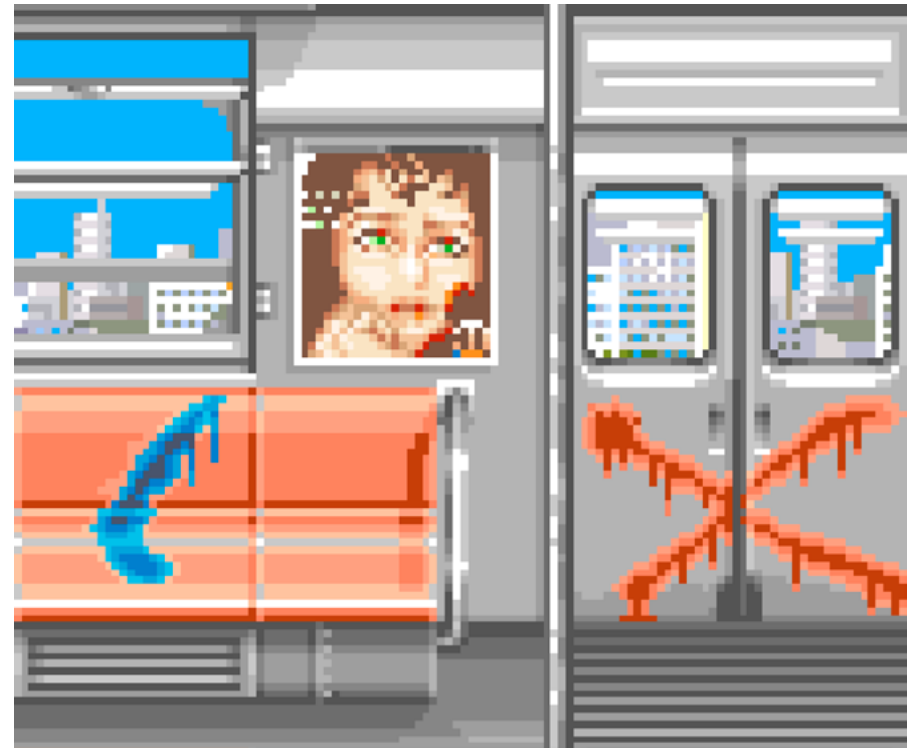
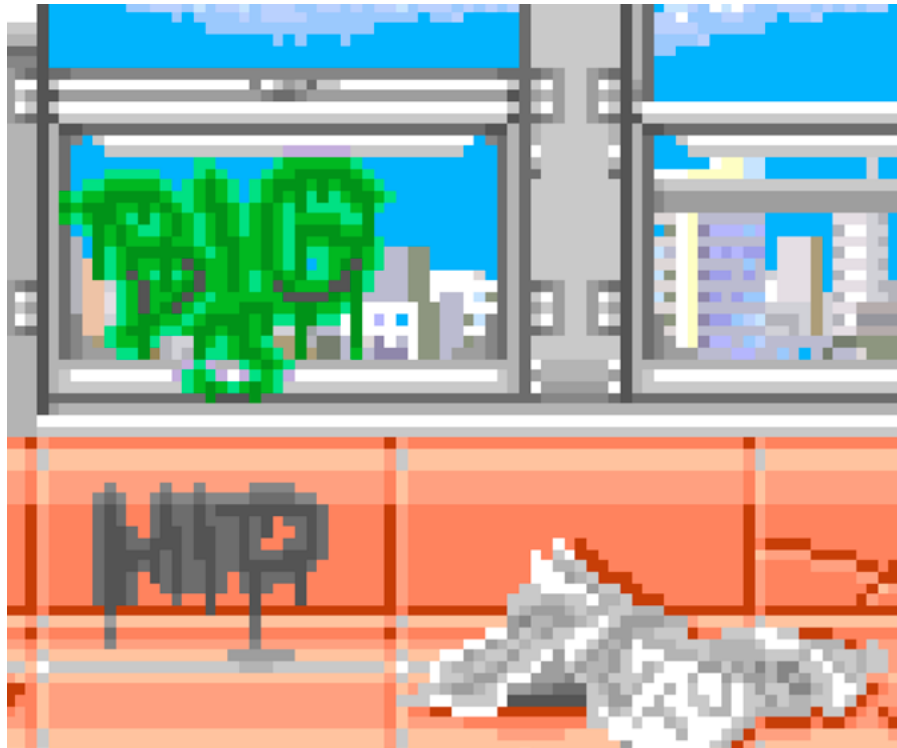
LES FRÈRES RIPOULAIN

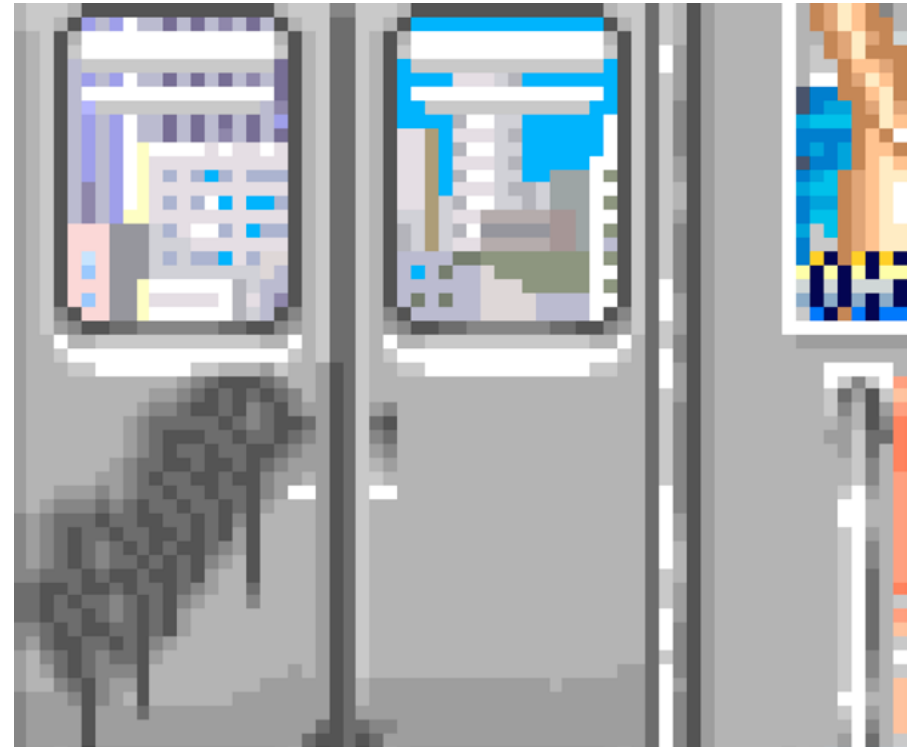


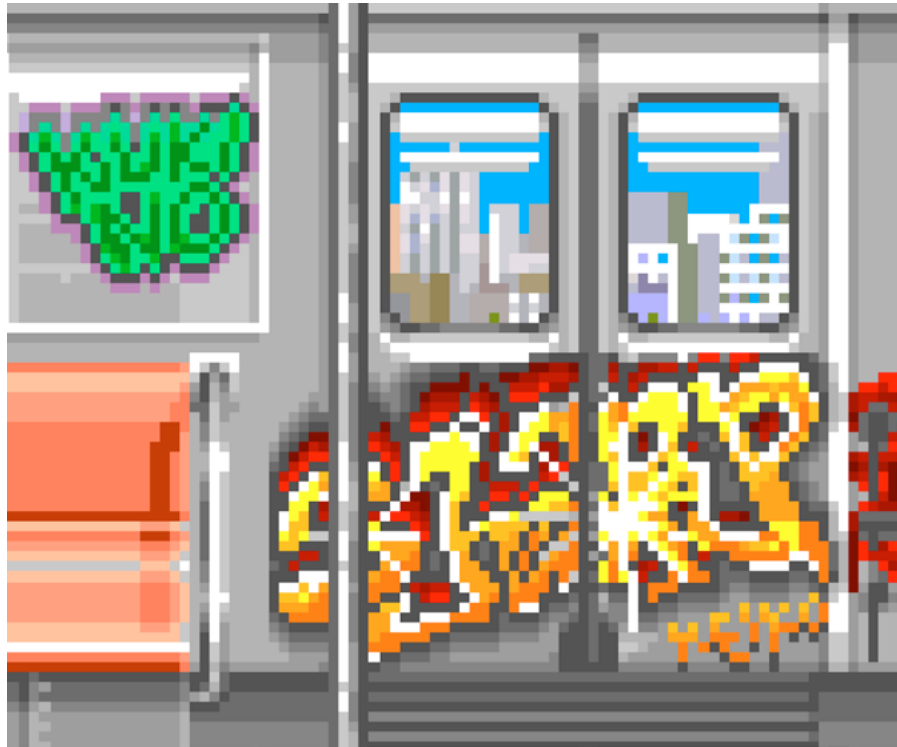


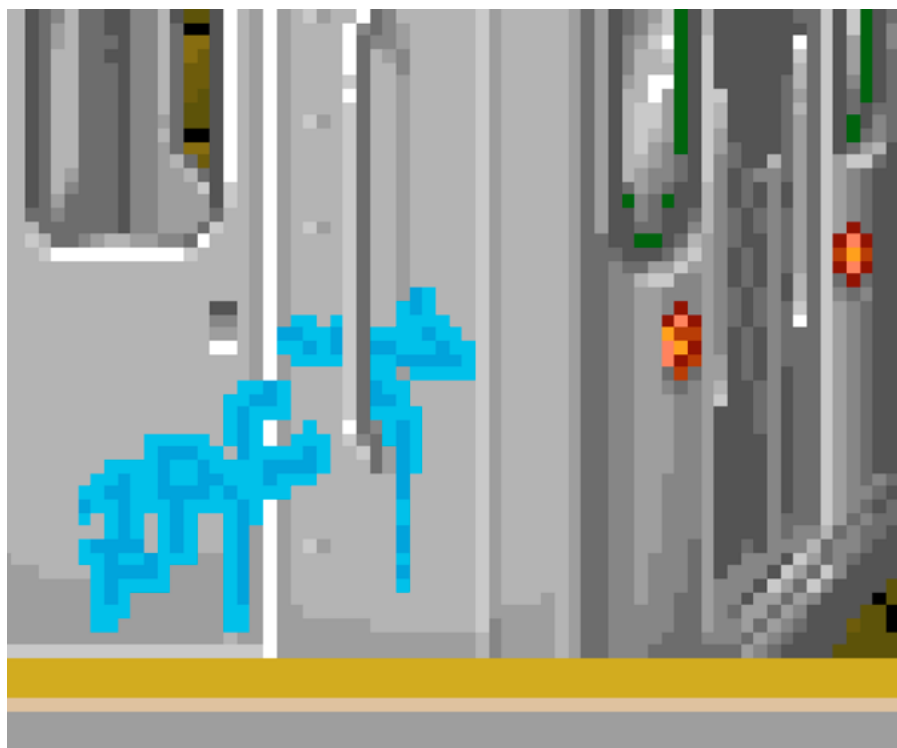


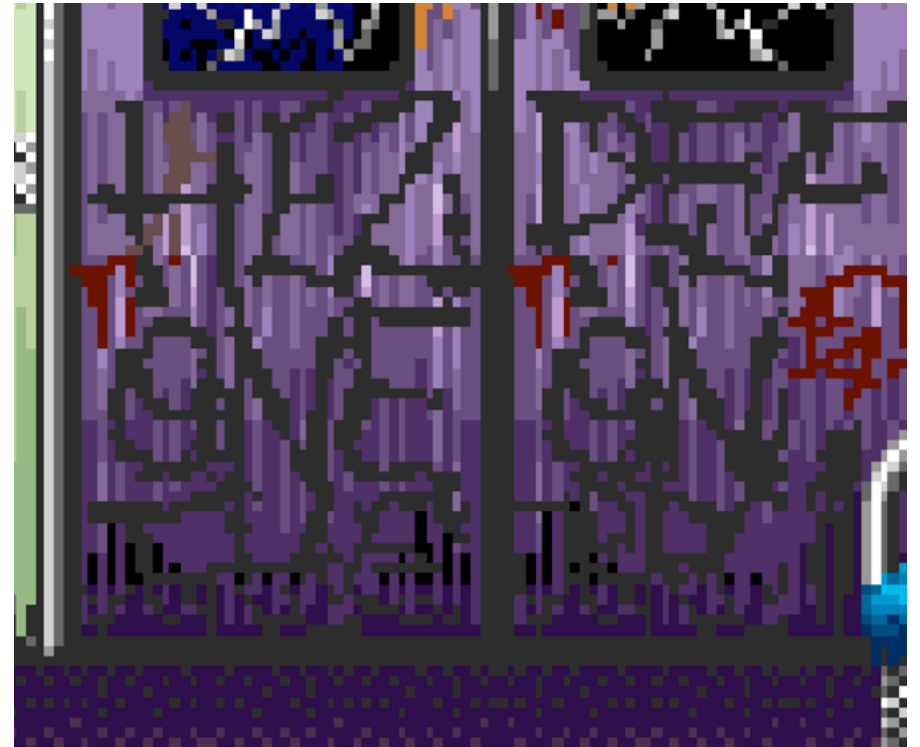
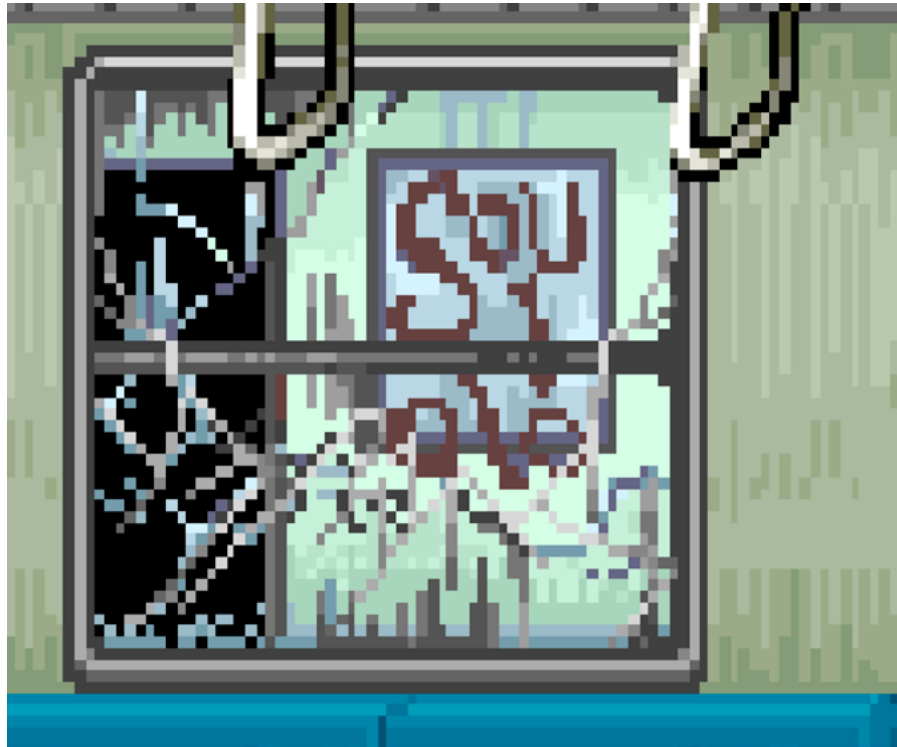




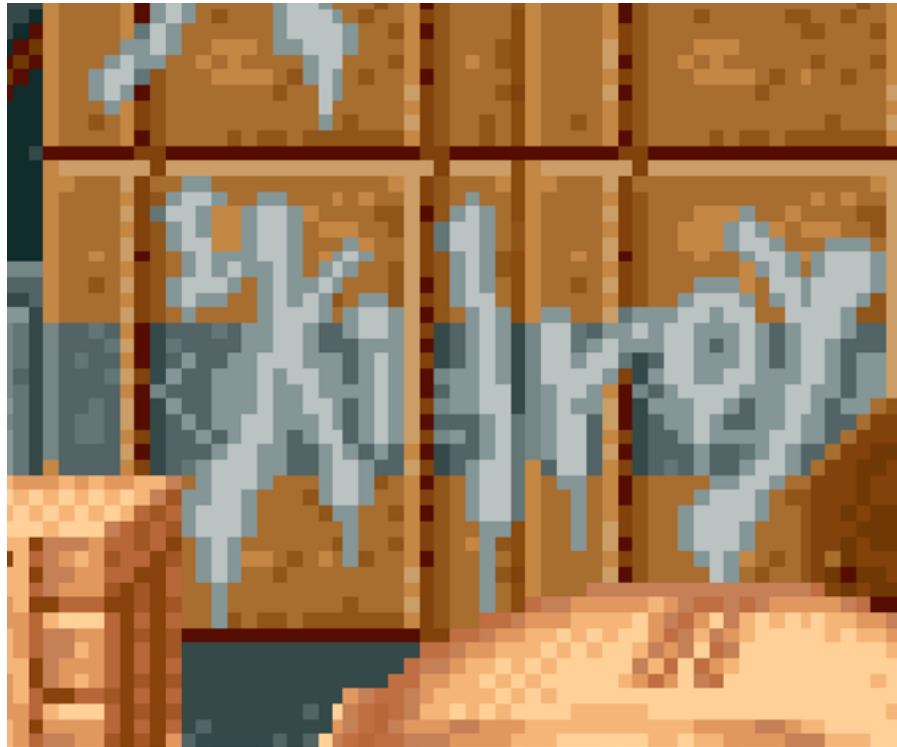


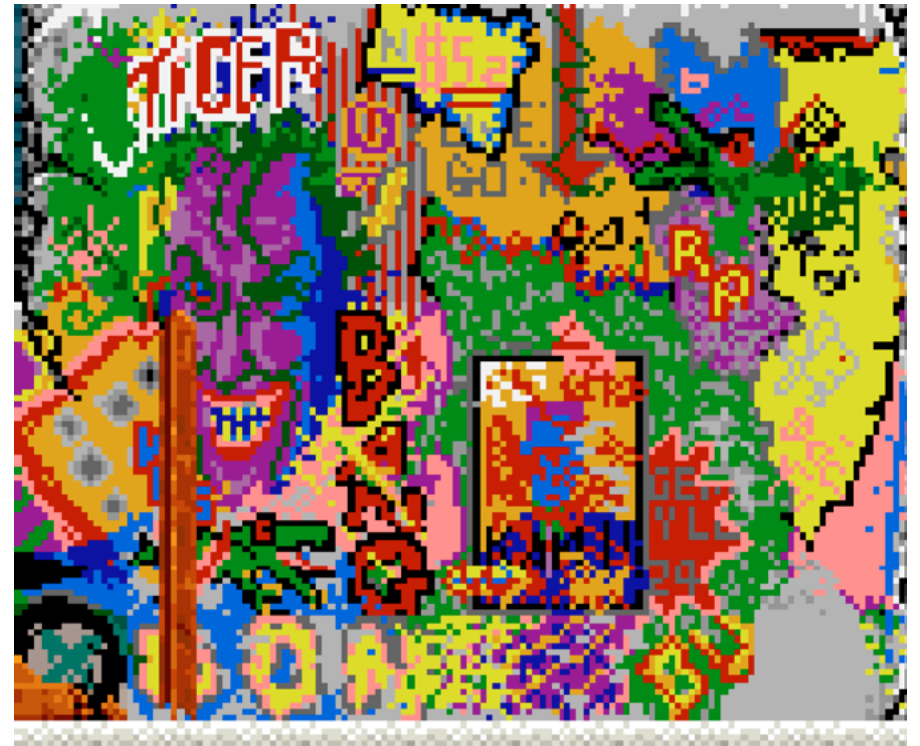


















As teenagers in the 1990s, David RENAULT and Mathieu TREMBLIN of the duo LES FRÈRES RIPOULAIN shared a passion for video game arcades in their respective provincial towns. They spent their Saturday afternoons hanging out with friends, discovering new 32-bit arcade games that might one day be released on their 16-bit home consoles. A five-franc coin only bought a few credits. They never had enough pocket money to finish the games and add their three-letter nicknames to the high score board.

-BEST PLAYERS-

1	MIN	30000	3	11	I.G	18000	2
2	HEN	29000	3	12	OMD	17000	2
3	IAM	28000	3	13	I.O	16000	2
4	ABO	26000	3	14	..?	15500	2
5	YEN	25100	3	15	RON	15000	2
6	AME	25000	3	16	TMO	13700	2
7	FUR	24900	2	17	IKA	5000	1
8	UHI	23100	2	18	SFX	3000	1
9	WAT	22000	2	19	KYO	2500	1
10	ENK	19000	2	20	DWC	1000	1

After several years of roaming vacant lots and doing graffiti together in the early 2000s, David and Mathieu decided to revisit these games that had fueled their imaginations, using console emulator software. In 2004, during numerous retro gaming nights with friends, they discovered the subtle presence of graffiti in their favorite beat 'em up, the legendary *Final Fight* (1989, Capcom).

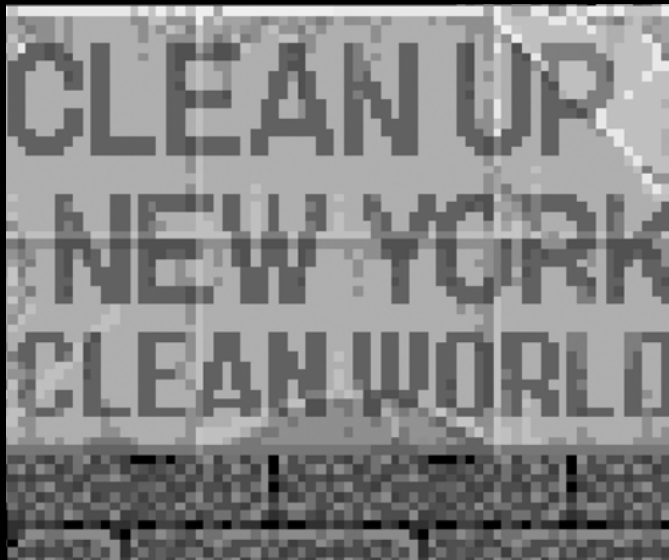


In this side-scrolling game, Metro City is under the thumb of the MAD GEAR gang, which perpetrates numerous crimes and acts of violence. Mike HAGGAR, the elected mayor and former professional wrestler, decides to stop them. The criminal organization kidnaps his daughter Jessica, and he races across the city to free her, aided by Jessica's boyfriend Cody and Guy, both seasoned street fighters and martial artists. The narrative structure of fighting games is always the same: the kidnapping or murder of a loved one by the bad guys becomes a pretext for taking the law into one's own hands, just as it legitimizes the use of violence in the eyes of the players.

That's all it takes for the RIPOULAIN to launch a visual investigation. They spend several afternoons exploring the pixelated cities of games like *Bad Dudes VS Dragon Ninja* (1988, Data East), *Crime City* (1989, Taito), *Crime Fighters* (1989, Konami), *Crude Buster* (1990, Data East), *Silent Dragon* (1992, Taito), and others, searching for precious graffiti artifacts to capture in the background of the action.

The aesthetics of video game graffiti are pragmatic, much like in the streets. The technical capabilities of the various platforms of the time determine the limited level of detail in the rendering, especially since graffiti serves only a subtle, immersive function. In their forms, tags and graffiti are reduced to their simplest elements: graphic gimmicks such as scribbles, flat colors, outlines, lines, and drips. Sometimes, names or slogans emerge that oscillate between the semantic field of destruction—like “DESTROY” or “DEAD END”—and the conventions of the genre—“KILROY” for “KILROY WAS HERE”, “PUNKS RULE” or “PUNX NOT DEAD” to evoke the place of graffiti in punk subculture, or even “HIP”, probably for the hip-hop movement. Also, since the web didn't yet exist when these games were created, knowledge about graffiti was transmitted through archetypes:

acronyms, like “SK” on the side of a subway car; onomatopoeia from comics, such as “BANG”, “FLASH”, or «cool»; surnames, like “SHEILA” or “DICK”, referring to the origins of graffiti writing in New York; and stereotypical pseudonyms of 1980s writers like “SHARP”, “WOLF”, or “CYBER”. Borrowings from existing writers, with “HEZ ONE” and “DEZ ONE”, whose calligraphic tagging style is very plausible.



In *Crude Buster*, we find this poster inserted into the scenery: “CLEAN UP NEW YORK CLEAN WORLD”.

It evokes a communication campaign surrounding the operation to eradicate graffiti in the New York subway, initiated by Mayor Rudolph GIULIANI between 1984 and 1989. Ironically, in the context of the game, this sign seems to be a relic of another era, since the action takes place in 2030, twenty years after the unexplained explosion of an atomic bomb in the heart of the city plunged the territory into post-apocalyptic chaos, where gangs of thugs rule with an iron fist.

Reduced to a symptomatic element of a complete lack of control, graffiti becomes an exemplification of the broken windows theory that served as the basis for the repression of delinquency in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States. If digital graffiti is, as in the urban space, a watermark of the lived city, it seems all the more crucial in beat ‘em up games to make the urban spaces traversed believable and to accentuate the immersive effects in these pixelated worlds left at the mercy of thugs.

In 2004, while reminiscing about video games in arcades in the early 1990s, LES FRÈRES RIPOULAIN realized that some beat 'em ups, like *Final Fight*, contained original or recreated graffiti to create a chaotic urban atmosphere, embodying the vigilante spirit at the heart of the game's plot. The rise of video game console emulators—and the Neo-Geo in particular, which played arcade titles—allowed them to conduct a visual investigation, traversing pixelated streets and subways in search of signs of graffiti writing culture subtly woven into the scenery.



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