The Little Czech Who Dreamed about Pixels

Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018).

Reading a comprehensive scholarly work about the gaming history of an ex-communist country is an illuminating and exhilarative experience for a game historian coming from a similar background as Jaroslav Švelch. As a teenage computer-game addict in Hungary in the 1980s, the period he examines, I thought no really "cool" computer games had been developed outside of the United States, Western Europe, or Japan. Digital games were windows through which we could peer out — or sometimes even step out — into a mesmerizing world, which was familiar and strange at the same time. Still, living in relative isolation, the exchange of games, game journals, and meeting at various copy parties was the only opportunity for us to learn about games from foreign countries. The Iron Curtain veiled us not only from the West — but in a way from each other as well.

Until recently, almost all video game history books, at least those available in English, tended to focus mainly on the game industry, and on well-known games and companies. Although some academic articles, and even a few popular books, covered some aspects of the video game history of the "periphery" in Europe, such as Patryk Wasiak's essays on Polish game history,[1] Zbigniew Stachniak's article on the hobby computer movement in the Soviet Union,[2] Denis Gießler's fascinating article about the Stasi monitoring computer games and clubs in East-Germany,[3] or Juho Kuorikoski's book about Finnish games,[4] not much has been written about regional histories. The publication of the book *Videogames Around the World* with its fascinating essays on the unknown history of regional game developments at least partly lifted this veil.[5] Jaroslav Švelch's book, the newest one, and a very important step in this direction, is a pioneering attempt to examine the regional history of games in a country on the "margins".

1) Patryk Wasiak, 'Computing behind the Iron Curtain: Social Impact of Home Computers in the Polish People's Republic', *Tensions of Europe Working Paper*, vol. 10, no. 8 (2010), pp. 1–17. Patryk Wasiak, 'Playing and Copying: Social Practices of Home Computer Users in Poland during the 1980s', in Gerd Alberts and Ruth Oldenyiel (eds), *Hacking Europe: From Computer Cultures to Demoscenes* (London: Springer, 2014), pp. 129–150.

2) Zbigniew Stachniak, 'Red Clones: The Soviet Computer Hobby Movements of the 1980s', *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2015), pp. 12–23.

3) Denis Gießler, 'Video Games in East Germany: The Stasi Played Along', *Zeit Online*, 21 November 2018. <https://www.zeit.de/digital/games/2018-11/computer-games-gdr-stasi-surveillance-gamer-crowd> [accessed 1 December 2019].

4) Juko Kuorikoski, *Finnish Video Games: A History and Catalog* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015).

5) Mark J. P. Wolf (ed), *Video Games Around the World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

But how to access the game history of the "peripheria"? Švelch sees clearly that "the contextual features that Western game histories have taken for granted — the existence of distribution infrastructures, the availability of goods and services, the business logic of game industries, and the discourse-defining role of marketing and specialist press — will not apply in this case" (p. XXV). The lack of a real game industry and professionalism in Eastern European countries led to amateur, or quasi-amateur, developments; projects whose value lies not necessarily in the technical execution or the artistic quality, but in the unique approach that amalgamates Western game iconography with East-European cultural patterns. The impossibility to obtain computers at a normal price and games in shops led to various tricks, such as smuggling in hardware and software, copying games "illegally", and establishing alternative distribution channels. The lack of information about the gameplay, and overall about the games and computers, resulted in home-made cassette-covers, maps, manuals and — at least in the case of Hungary — the heavy dominance of the column of correspondence in game magazines.[6] While the history and culture of early copy-parties, especially in the Scandinavian countries, is well documented,[7] the existence of homebrew clubs, where hundreds or even thousands exchanged games and knowledge about computers and software, is something quite specific for Eastern Europe. Last but not least, Western popular culture, which infiltrated communist countries slowly but irresistibly (for example, in the form of movies, often through over-copied VHS cassettes), resulted in new types of self-expression. Games, similarly to cartoons or underground music, reflected on one hand both ironically and critically on the communist area, but on the other hand they relied on Western pop-culture.

Taking all this into consideration, talking about the game history of Eastern Europe is impossible without the prioritization of social and cultural factors. Švelch's book, being part of MIT's game history series, focuses heavily on these socio-cultural questions, on the everyday life and practice of users in the past, in the vein of German historiography movement called *Alltagsgeschichte*.[8] Talking about amateur game designers and gaming subcultures, he also relies heavily on the term *vnye* invented by Alexei Yurchak, which is a word describing "simultaneously being inside and outside of a context" (i.e., the socialist regime)[9] and also on Claude-Levi Strauss's concept of a *bricoleur*, who, unlike an *engineer*, always does "whatever is at hand".[10] The amateur game designer is connected in the book to the stereotype of "the little Czech", and to the national myth of *golden Czech hands*, "that manage to cope with everything they touch" (p. 65).

The chapters in the book follow a clear path, moving from general questions of industrialization to specific games, from official cultural politics to microhistories, and to forms of artistic self-expression. However, the minimalistic yet expressive cover of the book, featuring a small pixelated figure running up a Kafkaesque labyrinth of red stairs, receives its full meaning only in the final chapters. He is a lonely yet ambitious person who tries to conquer stubbornly the law of gravitation, aiming for something higher, better, more individualistic — maybe freedom?

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6)   Tamas Beregi, 'Hungary', in Wolf (ed), *Video Games Around the World*, pp. 219–234.
7)   Patryk Wasiak, '"Illegal Guys". A History of Digital Subcultures in Europe during the 1980s', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2012), pp. 257–276. <https://zeithistorische forschungen.de/site/40209282/default.aspx> [accessed 1 December 2019].
8)   Alf Lüdtke (ed), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
9)   Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
10) Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 17.

This figure is actually completely invisible in the first chapters, which provide a general overview of computerization in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. The first chapter, called **Micros in the Margin**, starts with the description of the political, economic, and cultural situation in the country and the exposition of the so called *scientific-technological revolution.* Although for Eastern-Europeans, especially for older generations, some of the information here might be evident, we should bear in mind that the book was written partly for a Western audience whose knowledge of the period and region is very questionable. Still, the chapter offers plenty of information and insight. Švelch talks about the electronization programs, the rise of technical intelligentsia, and the place of women in this process, the so called socialist consumerism, the first projects in Czechoslovakia to manufacture national microcomputers such as the SAPI-1, school computers such as the PMD 85, IQ 151 or the Ondra or so called "Farm Computers" such as Didaktik's Gama, which was the "first Czechoslovak-made global machine, combining British chips and Soviet RAM with domestic components" (p. 32). Perhaps the most interesting part in this chapter is the description of the argument between Eduard Smutný, "then a bona fide hero of local computer enthusiasts" (p. 27) and promoter of the micro-revolution, and Ivan Malec, from the cadre of the Ministry of Electrotechnical Industry, who questioned people's need for micros. This argument, which Švelch calls the *clash of teleologies*, symbolizes perfectly the confrontation of the progressive ideas and the backward thinking about computers in the period.

In the second chapter, **Hunting Down the Machine**, Švelch describes how hardware was hunted down and smuggled into Czechoslovakia through individual channels. He explains why Sinclair ZX Spectrum, a relatively cheap and versatile computer and later also the Atari 400 became the most prevalent platforms in the country. This is especially interesting if we examine regional histories, as in Poland and Russia the ZX Spectrum was also the most popular computer, while in Hungary the Commodore 64 was the absolute favorite. Švelch uses the term hunting, based on Roger Silvestone's metaphor of the wild.[11] He also describes the role of the computer in the room, "a piece of Western influence encapsulated in socialist material culture" (p. 59), which he even illustrates with some photos.

The third chapter, **Our Amateur Can Work Miracles**, starts to move from the history of informatics towards social history. We see here how hobbyists built their network, and how various pioneer organizations and Svazarm, the paramilitary organization, functioned as umbrella institutions for amateur clubs. This is where the previously mentioned term *vnye* and also the phrase "the little Czech" becomes most relevant. Švech also uses the term *bastlení,* a synonym for *tinkering*, describing the process of producing home-made peripherals like joysticks or external keyboards. We can read here about the role of *Amateur Radio Magazine* and the *Mikrobáze* newsletter of the biggest amateur computer club, the Prague 602 and also about the rise of the first magazine *Spektrum*, and the later *ZX Magazín*. Švelch even connects them to some of the samizdat magazines of the period, which is a fascinating part of this chapter.

Chapter four, **Who's Afraid of Gameplay**, talks about an important debate and controversy in hobbyist circles: how to approach computer games? More traditional hobbyists, who enjoyed construction-deconstruction and the dominance over the machine, feared that games would take over the control on life of the youth, just like drugs. Hence, various techniques, such as writing cheats — so called *pokes* — for the ZX Spectrum games, *cracking* the games — removing copy protection —, and also adding trainers that provide unlimited life or ammo can bring back this dominance over the soft-

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11) Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994).

ware. On the other hand, liberal advocates of games, such as the academic Bohuslav Blažek, or the best-known game-maker and collector František Fuka, promoted games: for them, submission to rules was a good and important experience for children and a tool for learning. Švelch often quotes Blažek's fascinating book *Labyrinth of Computer Games,* which unfortunately is available only in Czech.[12]

The fifth chapter of the book, **Lighting Up the Shadows**, describes the channels of *sneakernet,* i.e., how unauthorized copies of games were distributed in the country. Švelch tries to track the journey of a particular cult game for ZX Spectrum, *Exolon*, from Western Europe through Eastern Europe to Czechoslovakia. He also examines various home-made cassette covers, menus, maps and walk-throughs, and also some cases when the lack of information led to interesting misinterpretation of games. As he mentions, Švelch employs here the concept of *paratextuality*.[13] Describing this phenom-ena, we can also think about the concept of participatory media, often used by Henry Jenkins about the culture of the youth.[14] Making huge maps of games in the 1980s was actually not a typical Eastern European phenomenon, as most of the programs did not have the *automap* function at all, and even manuals often did not contain maps. However, deciphering menus of some complex games, as in the case of the strategy-RPG hybrid *Shadowfire* that is mentioned here cleverly, was really a heroic task without the proper manual of the program.

The final two chapters of the book, **Bastard Children of the West** and **Empowered by Games**, fi-nally describe some Czech-made games. These are not only the most specific but also probably the most interesting parts of the book. In the sixth chapter, we can examine various clones and arrange-ments of Western games. We learn about the works of the "Golden Triangle" of game developers: Tomáš Rylek (TRC), František Fuka (Fuxoft), and Miroslav Fídler (Cybexlab). Švelch describes at length two dominant game genres: text adventures (*textovka*) games and the so called "hacking games". Švelch explains the enormous popularity of the *textovka* games (for example, Fuka's Indiana Jones-inspired games) with three factors: they were easy to produce, they provided a niche in which local programmers did not have to compete with Western professionals, and finally "they were considered valuable amongst hobbyists" (p. 177). On the other hand, the popularity of the hacking games (like *The Sting* series) can also be explained by relatively easy coding work and gratification of hacking and technical fantasies (p. 180). Finally, in the seventh chapter, Švelch argues that "the computer offered a seemingly infinite space for exploration and self-realization in a society that tended to close off op-portunities rather than open them" (p. 185). Examining text adventure games like *The Mystery of the Conundrum*, *Space Saving Mission*, *Shatokhin*, or *RECONSTRUCTION*, he shows how the Western and Soviet iconography amalgamate and how these games reflect, often ironically, upon communism. The game *Indiana Jones in Wenceslas Square*, where the goal is to escape the square and return home, can be viewed as a hyperbole about the turbulent period and an opportunity to relive the famous demon-stration and thus the history itself.

The 350+ page long book (though the body text is around 250 pages) is extremely well researched. Švelch bases his book not only on an enormous body of academic material but also on personal inter-views and experiences which give the book a living, breathing atmosphere despite its density. Although the path Švelch follows is a meandering one, his way is almost always clear, and his style is both inter-

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12) Bohuslav Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1990).

13) Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

14) Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

esting and entertaining, making the book enjoyable both for an academic and general readership. The only fault I find is that the actual discussion of games comes a little bit too late in the book: only after a hundred pages, which is almost half of the work. But again, as I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed the road leading to these chapters a lot.

Talking about the final two chapters, I also have a slight feeling something is lacking. I would have been happy to learn a little more about the development history of the games that Švelch mentions and also about the obstacles the programmers had to overcome during the development process. For example, the major problem for Hungarian text adventure game developers was to overcome the linguistic obstacles of the conjugation and the inflexion. Being completely unfamiliar with the Czech language, I would have been interested to learn how a genre that is so strongly rooted in the expressive forms of the language is altered in another country.

While I found fascinating the passages where Švelch connected the *bricoleur* to the myth of "golden Czech hands", and also magazines and games to the underground music and samizdat culture, I was left wondering whether the connection of Czech games to national cultural heroes, to Czech history, the strong tradition of Czech animated films, and to the Czech humour could be exploited deeper. Who could have been the Czechoslovak equivalent of the famous ZX-Spectrum platform-heroes, Jet Set Willy or Monty Mole? What could have been the reason that the Indiana Jones-themed games became so popular?

The epilogue talks about the recent success of Czech game companies, but are these rooted anyhow in the games of the eighties? While Hungary, the leading Eastern European country in game production in the 1980s, almost completely lost its industry to the new millennium, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Russia became hotbeds of some of very successful franchises. Can it somehow be connected to the game history of the eighties or is this only a question of clever economical politics and education?

Talking about local game history of Czechoslovakia, Švelch never forgets about Eastern and Western European games, making clever comparisons. However, sometimes it would be interesting to see these contrasts and analyses go a bit deeper. For example, it is an interesting question where the border between amateurism and professionalism lay in the period. Some of the biggest hits in the UK were made by amateur, self-taught bedroom-programmers. It might be interesting to compare the home-brew scene of other European countries to the Czech one, just as with the forms of self-expression in games as routes of escapism.

But in truth, these are mainly rhetorical questions, and it is probably not fair at all to address them to an academic whose main interest is the social and cultural aspects of Czechoslovak games and the forms of self-expression behind the Iron Curtain. To summarize my thoughts, I must say that *Gaming the Iron Curtain* is one the most exciting, well-researched, and well-presented academic books about game history I have come upon in the past few years. It is an important addition to the body of work on game history: clever and fascinating at the same time and pleasurable to read from the first to the last sentence. It is interesting not only for game scholars but also for anybody into Czech and Eastern European popular culture of the eighties. Hopefully, we will see similar books in the near future, and they will prove also that although in the shadow of great developments small figures were running up and down on red stairs in some Kafkaesque labyrinths, their path is at least as heroic and uplifting as that of their Western counterparts.

Tamas Beregi