

THE ISSUE OF SLOVAK DIGITAL-GAMES' MUSEOLOGY

[Interview with Maroš BROJO](#)

Nikola Kaňuková (N. K.): Try to explain the reason for the creation of the design museum and its content.

Maroš Brojo: The Slovak Design Museum (SMD) was established under the Slovak Design Center several years ago with the goal of mapping various forms of Slovak design throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. While we already had well established museums dedicated to Slovak art it is also a common practice to have a design museum and we were still missing one in Slovakia. Creating the SMD finally managed to change this and we finally have the opportunity to have an institution that systematically collects, preserves and researches our design. Similar to art, design is a very broad term that represents a lot of very different areas like product design, textiles and fashion, materials, multimedia or communication design. Thus the museum collects and researches a lot of very different things like clothing, posters, illustrations, furniture, electronics, objects of day to day use, multimedia, car designs etc. under various specialized collections.

N. K.: Can we find digital games there? Which ones?

Maroš Brojo: There is also a sub-collection focused on digital games and game design under the multimedia design collection. We are not really interested in anything apart from digital games (yet). The main reason why we decided to start working on digital games is that digital content can get lost fairly easily and it's much harder to preserve it than to preserve physical things. So we are under quite a lot of pressure to collect as many games as soon as possible because they might be lost forever in 10 – 20 years. We do not focus on games outside of Slovakia because we believe that every country should have institutions for managing their own cultural heritage and we have enough work with our own. So for now and also probably in the future we only focus on collecting Slovak and Czechoslovak games.

N. K.: How does the museum cover the area of digital games?

Maroš Brojo: Researching, archiving and preserving digital games is a big challenge and every institution around the world is doing it differently. There are no unified guidelines or examples of long term work that we can just copy and apply to our institution. Accepting digital games as part of our cultural heritage is only a matter of the last ten or so years. With this in mind every institution has to figure this out mainly by itself. Since my area of expertise is film studies where these kind of initiatives are already well established, this is where we began. Looking at how you not only preserve films but also documentation and everything around them is a good starting point. A lot of institutions all around the world were mainly focussed on this before starting their work with games. So what we try to do is to cover games

as a complex phenomenon. It's not our goal to only collect copies or game files but we try to collect everything. So as part of the collection you will also find metadata, posters, cover art, pirated copies, interviews with developers, source codes, gameplay videos, reviews, magazine scans etc. When you manage to collect all of this you should hopefully be able to piece together a complex picture of a specific time period, the wider context of a game being developed the way it was or overall professional and gamer perceptions of said game. Our ultimate goal is to gather and catalogue as many games as possible and to sort out and organize all the materials and information around them. This should enable researchers in the future to have a central information and resource hub to be able to write partial studies or a complete history of Slovak games and game development.

N. K.: Percentually, what part of Slovak digital-gaming history is currently covered by the Slovak Museum of Design?

Maroš Brojo: We are building the most complete database of Slovak games which currently has more than 250 entries but we expect this number to rise to more than 400 in the future. Each entry has more than 30 types of metadata. This alone is a lot of work but is necessary as an anchor for further research. Filling out all the metadata alone will take several years but if we manage to do this we will have sufficient information to know most of the game developers and will be able to contact them. This will lead to gathering more detailed information and materials for a lot of these games. So by means of maintaining evidence of Slovak games I would say that we have at least an idea of around 60 – 70 percent of existing games and the rest are missing. These are not necessarily the oldest ones but can be casual games made by one or two companies that thrived in the flash games era or a lot of them can be games made for dumb phones on the Java platform that were forgotten with the rise of smartphones. When it comes to physical materials, documentation, official copies, interviews and let's play videos we are still at the beginning.

N. K.: As this issue is solved only partially and rather regionally, the most fundamental question is: Can digital games be considered as works of art?

Maroš Brojo: I think that every gamer with a deeper understanding of this medium will be able to identify artistic tendencies in specific games and can even differentiate between games made purely for fun and games that convey a deeper message or aesthetical value. I myself stopped asking this question and decided to not fight for the recognition of games as art. I think that games as a medium can be messengers of all the ideas, feelings and experiences that can be communicated through film, literature, theatre and other art forms. And all of these games also communicate them in specific ways that not a lot of other media can (like interactivity). As for people that need persuading I think it's actually easier just to show specific examples. This leads to a faster understanding. But you can also take a longer route. Take a specific artform (like film, literature or theatre) and by means of finding analogies in their theoretical studies and history you can basically demonstrate that games are developing the same way (from entertainment, through wild experimentation to a more established form of art with its own specific language and tendencies).

N. K.: What is the importance of the digital games' museology in global?

Maroš Brojo: Games are simply part of our cultural heritage. It doesn't matter if they are accepted as art or not. They have become such a huge phenomenon and such a big part of many people's lives that they deserve the attention of many institutions around

the world. As with any part of our culture games can help understand previous generations, subcultures and the cultural and sociological tendencies of a specific time period. So they are a great tool for further research that doesn't even have to revolve directly around them. I think that several perceived values of games (cultural heritage, sociological research tool and a new artform) is what drives museums and archives to more and more activities connected to games. From the history of film we have also learned that it is much wiser to start documenting, archiving and researching a medium sooner rather than later so nothing important gets lost. I believe that many institutions realize this and with this medium being natively digital we have to be much more careful. We will not be able to save a game that has been lying somewhere in a box for 30 years on a diskette or CD.

N. K.: What challenges do digital games' museology bring to our region?

Maroš Brojo: I think that the biggest challenge is still to be widely accepted as a relevant museological subject of research. While we have started doing it in Slovakia other countries in our region are a bit slower. But I believe that all of them will slowly come to the conclusion that it is necessary and will start to approach already-existing fan-based and private initiatives and collectors. We can be lucky that there is big retrogaming community all around the world that has already done a ton of work for us. Hopefully Slovakia and our activities will serve them as a good example.

N. K.: From a museological point of view, which Slovak games and gaming devices are the most valuable?

Maroš Brojo: We have a very exciting and fascinating history of personal computing in Slovakia since we were manufacturing our own hardware before the revolution. The PMD-85 engineered by Roman Kišš was our first personal computer and people were already making games for it in Czechoslovakia. This is basically a period that represents the beginning of our game development. The PMD-85 was being sold from 1984. After the PMD-85 came the well-known and popular Didaktik Gama and Didaktik M PCs that were compatible with the ZX Spectrum and were owned by thousands of people from Slovakia in the 80s and 90s. Thanks to these computers and the ZX Spectrum platform we have a very rich heritage of around 30 early games. As for games it's still hard to determine which ones were historically the most important since we don't know a lot about some of them. But for those that we do know we have games like Šatochin by Stanislav Hrda, Perfect Murder by Ľudovít Wittek or Quadrax by Caldron studio just to name a few of the early ones. I could name a few more examples from the later 90s era but we are still piecing together the whole context.

N. K.: Do current trends, retro-gaming and emulation, have a positive or negative impact on digital games' museology?

Maroš Brojo: The retrogaming community are actually the first historians and archivists of digital games. If it wasn't for them we would have lost a lot of games. These people were creating databases and collecting games much sooner than any professional historian or museologist. We are just continuing or expanding their work. Emulation is an extremely useful tool for us because a lot of the hardware will gradually stop working and we will not have enough resources to fix it in the future. So we will necessarily have to rely on emulation in the future. In most cases it's also much easier to actually work with an emulator instead of using original hardware that can often be slow, faulty and unreliable. That is if

you're not searching for something very specific that only original hardware can provide like the way some geometry is rendered on old CRT televisions. When doing an exhibition you can also approach it in two ways. You can present games on their original hardware which brings more authenticity to the experience but requires constant attention and maintenance during the exhibition, or you can use emulators and really focus just on the games while providing a more streamlined access to them.

Maroš Brojo

Maroš Brojo is the organizer of the annual event Fest Anča Game Days that introduces European digital games to the general public and provides space for game developers to meet together. He works for the Slovak Game Developers Association and he is the project coordinator of the New Talents promotional initiative at the Visegrad Animation Forum in the Czech Republic. As a curator he works at the Slovak Museum of Design, focusing on digital games and multimedia history, archiving and preservation. He is also a member of the Slovak Arts Council support program for multimedia and digital games.

