

Game Studies as a Subject for Academic Approach and Its Significance in Terms of Cultural Heritage

Interview with Jaroslav ŠVELCH

Mgr. et Mgr. Jaroslav Švelch, Ph.D.

Charles University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Smetanovo nábřeží 6
110 01 Prague 1
CZECH REPUBLIC
svelch@fsv.cuni.cz

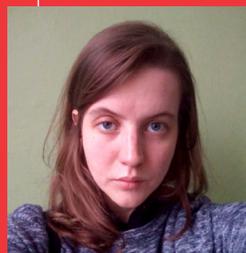


Jaroslav Švelch is a researcher, author and lecturer interested in theory, history and design of video games. Currently, he works as an assistant professor at Charles University and recently his monograph *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* has been published by MIT Press. His work also includes research on other various topics, such as humour in games, representation and reception of monsters in video games, the Grammar Nazi phenomenon, and language use online.

Interviewer

Mgr. Alexandra Kukumbergová

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Faculty of Mass Media Communication
Námestie J. Herdu 2
917 01 Trnava
SLOVAK REPUBLIC
alexandrakukumbergova@gmail.com



Alexandra Kukumbergová is a PhD. candidate at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, currently working on her thesis focused on gamification.

Alexandra Kukumbergová (A. K.): After high school, you chose journalism as the field of your studies. As a vivid player, did you always have in mind games as an option for academic study and journalism and media was the closest subject field for doing so, since there were no study programmes directly dealing in games back then?

Jaroslav Švelch: That is a good question to start with. I was an avid player when I graduated high school in 1999, but I did not envision I would study games – there was no such option and I don't even know if I'd go for it if there was one. I was a big fan of rock and alternative music and for some time saw myself as a music journalist – a profession that has by now more or less ceased to exist. I also pondered studying computer science, but my dad, a programmer himself, convinced me not to do it, saying it's an unhealthy job. I was a decent writer, so I applied to get into a journalism program, and I got in. Later, I also studied linguistics and translation studies, because I didn't find the journalism program intellectually challenging – it was mostly just about the craft. I only got to studying games much later, when I started doing my PhD.

A. K.: Imagine you were 18 again; if you were choosing again, would you be considering game-oriented fields? Do you see a future in such studies?

Jaroslav Švelch: That's a tough question. I appreciate having the diverse humanities and social scientific education that I have, and it has certainly helped me in my academic career. Even for people who want to work in the game industry, I think it's important to have a wide and varied background. In these times of increasing specialization, I'm all for interdisciplinarity and giving people a broad foundation they can build on, not just training them for their future jobs from day one. I do see a lot of potential in in game development, game design and game studies education, but I don't think someone should spend five years of university education studying 'only' games.

A. K.: Do you see a significant difference between how game oriented studies are perceived in the west or Scandinavia and Baltics in comparison to middle and eastern Europe? There sure is a quality gap, such as in most of the other fields, but question is what you think of the tempo of growth and if we can still blame the later start due to soviet era.

Jaroslav Švelch: In Central and Eastern Europe, game studies have been on the rise for some time now, and I'm happy to see more and more scholars from the region at international conferences. In the early 2010s, it was usually just one or two people and that was quite sad. The CEEGS conference, which I co-founded in 2014, certainly helped launch some of these researchers to successful international careers and/or worldwide recognition. In the past, access to international publication venues was complicated by the lack of experience and language skills. But I wouldn't blame it solely on the Soviet era. The big issue here is resources. For a long time, it was considered a luxury having people research something as 'obscure' as digital games, and therefore these fields first developed in richer countries. And if doctoral students and early career researchers aren't able to earn a decent living, they will continue to flee to richer countries or give up on academia.

A. K.: Last year, your book *Gaming the Iron Curtain* got published by MIT Press, which is of course a prestigious happening, but one can think of a little contradiction in it – on one hand, it sure is rewarding in some sense but on the other, don't you think it indicates some lack of interest in this topic from local institutions?

Jaroslav Švelch: The book will in fact come out in a Czech translation next year, through the Akropolis publishing house. Before I got the contract with MIT Press, I was talking to several Czech publishers and they were not interested in publishing the book in Czech, with the exception of Karolinum, the publishing house of my university, which is obliged to publish any book that is approved by a faculty committee. I don't want to be too negative though. It is still a pretty new topic and academic publishers are underfunded and overburdened. During my research, I did get some funding from my department at Charles University for interview transcriptions, proofreading and such. Not a lot of money, but it did help.

A. K.: In your research and work on the book, did you encounter some significant help from Czech cultural institutions? Do you feel games have enough interest and recognition from the state and general public, maybe in terms of academic approach?

Jaroslav Švelch: Well, archivists and librarians were generally helpful, and I really appreciate their – often inadequately paid – work. I also got support and help from the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, who funded three conversions of 1980s activist games to modern systems, now available on their website: <http://www.studenti89.usd.cas.cz/pocitacove-hry/>. That was a great and fun project that I very much enjoyed working on. But Czech memory institutions like the National Technical Museum or the National Film Archive are not particularly interested in the history of games and hobby computing. Or to be more precise, they are somewhat interested but lack the funding and manpower to do anything about it because they don't see it as a part of their primary mission. The Slovak Museum of Design, on the other hand, seems to have done some actual work to preserve Slovak computer games from the 1980s.

A. K.: In Slovakia, there seem to be two main ways how to look at video games. Common opinion is that it's just child's play – that's mostly the view of the older generation that did not grow up playing video games, but rather witnessed their children doing so. The second common approach is understanding games as a business opportunity. Perception of games as part of cultural heritage is still missing; at least in state institutions and this job falls on individuals and hobbyists. Do you think that the Czech Republic is doing better at supporting of preservation of games? Should it even be perceived as an independent field?

Jaroslav Švelch: I think that Slovakia or Poland are currently doing better than the Czech Republic in preserving and exhibiting the national history of games – but the example to follow is that of Finland, which has an amazing and well-curated national games museum in Tampere. The Finnish game museum is an independent, publicly funded institution. That's a good model, but at the same time, I think that the National Technical Museum, the

National Film Archive or even the National Technical Library could also do the job. It just takes some funding and some will to do it. There are some private collectors and private museums, and I'm happy that we have them. But they tend to show hardware without the context needed to educate and to help people understand the significance of the artifacts that they're showing. Moreover, they rarely show Czechoslovak hardware and software because it's neither attractive nor popular. Online fan archivists do an amazing, admirable job collecting and exhibiting digital copies of 1980s games online. But their archives are precarious. I'm afraid what's going to happen if, one day, one of them forgets to pay server fees. I believe that systematic preservation of old games requires and deserves institutional support.

A. K.: We know there are some unsettled issues surrounding video game history (you talked about a few unknown authorships). For example, we know that Jaro Filip (mostly known as a musician and comedian, but also one of the first fans of computer technology), did actually write and make at least one video game, but it's yet to be found. In your research for the book, have you encountered some other unresolved questions, maybe in form of some game that was just mentioned, but never found?

Jaroslav Švelch: Many of the games that were produced have been lost. The 300 to 400 games that have been preserved from the 1980s are but a fraction of what people wrote at the time. That is also true of games for minicomputers and mainframes. To my knowledge, none of the Czech minicomputer/mainframe games are available today, but we know that some existed based on interview material. As for microcomputers, there are titles that are mentioned in club newsletters or magazines but haven't surfaced. There is one particular game which I would love to track down – it's called *Pepa v dole* (Joe in the Mine) and I played it in the early 1990s on the ZX Spectrum. If I remember correctly, it was made as promotional material for an actual mine. That would make it quite a special case. But, alas, I never had my own copy and the game hasn't been found so far. At the same time, it is important to note that dedicated fan archivists unearth new games every now and then by digitizing tapes and disks. Maybe they will come across Joe in the Mine.

A. K.: Do you find parallels between dissident parts of gaming culture in socialist Czechoslovakia and pro-democratic tendencies in current events on the gaming scene? Or are the situations beyond comparison, maybe because of better comprehension of technology by the governments, or even because of the interest of enormous tycoons such as Tencent?

Jaroslav Švelch: The common thread here is that games have always been political. They contain politics; they are entangled in politics and can be used for political purposes, including activism and dissent. The protesters in Hong Kong today, for example, use digital technologies and game culture in many playful ways that resonate with the playful protest some Czechoslovak authors engaged in in the 1980s.

A. K.: The last question is about the opening of the new study programme on FAMU. It was announced and discussed, but last public news is now almost one year old. You were presented as member of the preparatory committee; do you have any news regarding this? Is the delay somehow connected with the departure of Helena Bendová, who was behind the preparation of this programme for accreditation? And in this study itself, would you prefer more practical orientation, focused on the development of games, or maybe studies focused on theoretical reflection?

Jaroslav Švelch: The game design Master's program is still in development and scheduled to open in 2020 or 2021. It will focus primarily on teaching game design – meaning the art and craft of designing games – but it will have a theoretical and historical component, too. I'm personally very much looking forward to teaching the game history class, because I believe that so much inspiration for new work can be found in old games. We have some brilliant design instructors from companies like Amanita Design and a great team, including experts on sounds, screenwriting, graphics, production, and other elements of game making. There have been some delays and obstacles along the way because FAMU is a very complex institution and accrediting new programs is hard work. But the project continues and Helena Bendová is going to return to FAMU next year.

