



GAMING THE IRON CURTAIN. HOW TEENAGERS AND AMATEURS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA CLAIMED THE MEDIUM OF COMPUTER GAMES

ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge, London : The MIT Press, 2018. 400 p. ISBN 978-0-262-03884-3.

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Gaming the Iron Curtain resonates in the era of postcolonial perspectives on culture histories. Even though the book does not mention it explicitly, the insight into the tactics of the first Czechoslovak players (and everything surrounding them) is in many ways exemplary work with the potential to shake the hegemonic view of the history of digital games. Studies such as the *Ultimate History of Video Games*¹ or *Replay: The History of Video Games*² try to shed some light on several of the important events in less dominant game markets, but their examples are more anecdotal, and they can hardly tell the whole story to readers not familiar with the contexts of the given markets. The late twentieth century was marked by many ideological divisions resulting in several different political, economical and cultural patterns for large groups of people around the globe. Naturally, the biggest differences appeared in the things that did not exist (or had virtually no cultural resonance) before the Cold War. One of those things was computers and everything that came with them, including digital games. *Gaming the Iron Curtain* maps the story of games in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the broadest possible context, starting with the “setting” (computer technology in the country) and ending with the analysis of many games created by the local amateur scene.

The author, Jaroslav Švelch, is a game scientist born in Czechoslovakia who has been working on this topic for over ten years, having done more than thirty interviews and gone through most of the available documents including magazines, fanzines, books, statistics and other relevant sources. But as the author himself mentions, his inspiration lies in A. Keer’s call for “social and cultural histories of games”,³ so the book is merely a collection of facts. *Gaming the Iron Curtain* tells a story of a small (even niche, as the author sometimes calls it) section of people’s everyday life. It shows that their experience with digital games was very different from the experience we usually read about in global game studies discourse. The difference is based on the very setting of the socialist country. The economy was more closed than open, five years plans were not able to fulfil many basic needs, and the idea of owning software was strongly lacking behind the British, American or Japanese markets.

However, socialist Czechoslovakia was not in total isolation, and goods were being moved through the borders (more in than out, of course). Also, institutions such as the army or technical universities used the first computers early, so people knew about the technology, and everyone who was willing to go through some discomfort could get their

1 For more information, see: KENT, S. L.: *The ultimate history of video games: from Pong to Pokémon and beyond: the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. Roseville : Prima Pub, 2001.

2 See also: DONOVAN, T.: *Replay: The history of video games*. Lewes : Yellow Ant, 2010.

3 KEER, A: *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. London : Sage Publications, 2006, p. 1.

hands on computers and digital games and even own some. The different and complicated environment required adapting different (and often complicated) tactics by Czechoslovak citizens. One of the best illustrations of the need to explore locally via social and cultural perspectives is the story of the people waiting in a queue the night before the shipping of Didactic Gama (a local ZX Spectrum clone) to an electronics store. The phenomenon was well known from capitalist countries where people usually waited to have the newest product first. But in socialist Czechoslovakia, waiting in queues was not the matter of being first, it often was the matter of having even a chance to buy things, as there was a great lack of computer products. These seemingly similar tactics have very different cultural and economical roots. Similarly, other tactics can sometimes look alike, and the book goes deep to explore why they were adapted.

For example, it is obvious that digital games were played in Czechoslovakia, but since most of the copies of Western and Japanese games were pirated versions copied many times, the way Czechoslovaks played was much more exploratory, since they did not have the manuals and other physical materials usually coming with games. Švelch identifies these tactics through the concepts of "Vnye", "Bricolage" and "Coding acts". The first concept proposed by A. Yurchak⁴ is a way of being in and out the totalitarian regime at the same time. Activities of Czechoslovak players fit this concept very well, as they were concentrating mostly in state-controlled clubs or institutions, but the conservative regime of normalisation (the period of Czechoslovak history after the Prague Spring) did not understand this novelty and all the consequences that came with it. This situation meant that Czechoslovakia was probably one of the first countries in which political (and strongly antiregime) games appeared.

The second concept "Bricolage"⁵ is also characteristic for many countries facing limited imports. To say it simply, Bricolage is engineering with limited resources. This resulted in many self-made hardware and software solutions. Consequently, it meant that Czechoslovak players were much craftier than their Western or Japanese counterparts. Lastly, as mentioned before, "Coding acts" were the results of games being cracked, hacked or reprogrammed from scratch. Gaming the Iron Curtain follows many of these games, but games themselves are only a vehicle to tell a compelling story about life in one peripheral socialist country. There is little to reproach, the text is easy to read, and the reader will not get lost in an overloading of resources (bibliography and ludography stretches through more than 30 pages). At some moments, mostly in the early part of the book, the author sometimes could have given more insight (or sources) to the context, as foreign readers might not be so familiar with all the nuances of socialist Czechoslovakia. But for the most part, this is not a big deal, as most necessary contextual information is provided. On the other hand, what a reader may miss in the ludography, are the countries of origin of the mentioned games. This detail makes it harder for further researchers to quickly identify where the game was created. Otherwise, the appendix part of the book is full of useful lists including a timetable of important dates and a glossary.

Gaming the Iron Curtain is a necessity for every game historian, and also for historians of technology and pop culture, as it brings a new local perspective of a formerly colonized state to the well-known (and many times repeated) discourse.

4 YURCHAK, A.: *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 141.

5 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *The savage mind*. London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 17.

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