

Pen & Paper & Xerox: Early History of Tabletop RPGs in Czechoslovakia

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ABSTRACT:

The study presents preliminary research focused on the history of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) in the former Czechoslovakia, especially *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and its local clone *Dračí doupě* (transl. *Dragon's Lair*, 1990). Based on theoretical literature, period sources and semi-structured interviews with first-generation players, it gives an overview of the first contacts with RPG in the specific post-communist cultural and economic context, focusing on the distribution and reception of *Dragon's Lair*, mainly in the Slovak part of the former common state. As a partial outcome of an ongoing research into the local gaming experience, the focus is not on the game itself or its commercial success, but rather on its players, their characteristics and initial experiences with tabletop RPGs in the early 1990s.

KEY WORDS:

Dragon's Lair, *Dungeons & Dragons*, fantasy, participatory culture, post-communist transformation, tabletop role-playing games.

Introduction

In this study, we deal with tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) and their early players in former Czechoslovakia. We focus on two specific titles, namely *Dungeons and Dragons* (or *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, further referred to as *D&D* or *AD&D*) and its Czech variant or clone *Dračí doupě* (transl. *Dragon's Lair*).¹ Tabletop RPGs, as we understand them today, did not exist before 1974. Their direct predecessors were strategy wargames.² Tabletop RPGs possess two features that make them very different: elements of children's make-believe games (the role-playing or simulation element) and omniscient referees, the dungeon master (or game master, further referred to as DM or GM) who is not neutral unlike in traditional wargaming.³

Development of the first proper RPG games is attributed to D. Wesely (the first to assign players single heroes instead of letting them command armies in 1967), D. Arneson (who was the first to put fantasy and medieval elements into traditional tabletop wargames), and G. Gygas (who drafted the rules for the so-called *Fantasy Game*, where players control heroes and roll dice to fight monsters, later transformed into *Dungeons and Dragons*).⁴ All three stayed in this field; D. Arneson was a game developer his whole life, G. Gygas continued to develop more game systems and D. Wesely went on to design board games and digital games. Even L. Schick, who was among the first to research and document the history of tabletop RPGs in 1991, stayed in the industry, known mostly as the lead content designer for *The Elder Scrolls Online*.⁵

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- 1 Remark by the authors: The original Czech title is *Dračí doupě*, but to make English expression easier, further in the study we will use its literal translation, *Dragon's Lair*.
 - 2 NIKOLAIDOU, D.: *The Wargame Legacy: How Wargames Shaped the Roleplaying Experience from Tabletop to Digital Games*. In HAMMOND, P., PÖTZSCH, H. (eds.): *War Games: Memory, Militarism and the Subject of Play*. London, New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 180-183.
 - 3 PETERSON, J.: *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2020, p. 4-12.
 - 4 SCHICK, L.: *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-playing Games*. Buffalo, NY : Prometheus Books, 1991, p. 17-20.; EWALT, D. M.: *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It*. New York, NY : Simon & Schuster, 2013, p. 65-70.
 - 5 ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS: *The Elder Scrolls Online*. [digital game]. Rockville, MD : Bethesda Softworks, 2014.

The process of bringing Dragon's Lair to market is a story in which we find several elements typical of the atmosphere of the turn of 1980s and 1990s in the countries of the Eastern bloc; from the initial unavailability of Western products leading to forced ingenuity to the 'wild' commercialization in the form of semi-fraudulent systems, and later, market standardization.⁶ With Dragon's Lair and RPGs in general, commercial sales are closely tied to community building; the two cannot be separated, as in this case, the players are not only consumers of the product but also its co-creators (as applies to this day).

From the point of view of game studies, we see *pen & paper* games as part of the overall picture of playing games in the region of the former Czechoslovakia; we call this a 'local gaming experience' and we are particularly interested in their distribution, adoption, reception, and user participation. Our exploratory study aims to outline the early history of tabletop role-playing games in the former Czechoslovakia (highlighting its Slovak part) in the years immediately before and after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. We also try to uncover certain qualitative aspects of the first tabletop RPGs in our region. To this purpose, we have combined research of secondary literature with primary sources in two forms: contemporary rulebooks, magazines and other print media, and interviews with local participants who we have addressed through various RPG internet communities. Interviewees were selected based on their first contact with RPGs in the late 1980s or early 1990s. We have conducted 11 semi-structured interviews (9 as internet video conferences, two as phone calls).⁷

In this text, we consider the terms *pen & paper* RPG and tabletop RPG interchangeable, as the literature hardly distinguishes between them (see for example their use by W. J. White and collective).⁸ As the survey shows, Czechoslovak pioneers were often short of other props (maps, figures and sometimes dice), limiting their gameplay only to pen and paper. Western games and their rulebooks were routinely distributed not by purchasing largely unavailable legal copies but by photocopying originals and spreading those illicit copies within networks of informal distribution. Both Czech and Slovak languages adopted (as did English) the term 'xerox' to denote photocopying regardless of the brand name of the copier.

Aspects Forming Tabletop RPG

When defining role-playing games, the problem is that some authors either do not consider them as proper games at all or see them as borderline cases.⁹ The determining factor is not their analogue medium, but that human game masters influence the rules. Rules, of course, also determine the rules – in the case of GM, we are talking about allowing options rather than limiting them. The definition can be also based on the emphasis on a specific part of the game; as a guide, we use R. Edwards' *GNS model*, which divides the approach of RPG players into three categories: *gamist*, *narrativist* (later replaced by *dramatist*) and *simulationist* (with possible slight overlaps).¹⁰ The initial model of GNS division focused on the player's motivation; in a looser understanding, we can also apply

6 See also: BUČEK, S.: Prvé herné komerčné subjekty na Slovensku. In JURÍŠOVÁ, V., KLEMENTIS, M., RADOŠINSKÁ, J. (eds.): *Marketing Identity 2016: Značky, ktoré milujeme*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2016, p. 194-208.

7 Remark by the authors: The names and other personal data of the interviewees stated in the study are used with their informed consent. The full text of the interviews has not been published.

8 WHITE, W. J. et al.: *Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. In ZAGAL, J. P., DETERDING, S. (eds.): *Role-Playing Game Studies*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 64.

9 ZAGAL, J. P., DETERDING, S.: Definitions of "Role-Playing Games". In ZAGAL, J. P., DETERDING, S. (eds.): *Role-Playing Game Studies*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 20.

10 EDWARDS, R.: *System Does Matter*. Released on 28th January 2004. [online]. [2022-04-15]. Available at: <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html>.

it to the style of the game, the game system or its definitions. For example, D. MacKay defines an RPG as “an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters’ spontaneous interactions are resolved”.¹¹

J. G. Cover also emphasizes the narrative side of the tabletop RPG, defining it as “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience”.¹² In addition to theorists, some game developers also favour the narrative principle. B. King emphasizes the narrative that distinguishes D&D from board games: “It was the first really interactive game. If you play board games there is always an objective or goal. D&D is the opposite. It’s about sitting down and telling stories with your friends”.¹³ Simulationist role-play emphasizes exploration (with exploration being at least partially present in two others) – according to R. Edwards, simulationist play varies as the object of exploration varies.¹⁴ The simulationist perspective, which carries elements of R. Caillouis’ mimicry, is employed more when we view tabletop RPGs as simulation games, which can be very appealing to some gamers, or when we attribute educational potential to them (as realism or plausibility is a significant part of this kind of role-play).¹⁵

The gamist approach focuses on winning and its means: *levelling, mechanics, challenges*. We may consider this category as a kind of starting point of the game: “Initially, Dungeons & Dragons was largely gamist, doing little to encourage in-depth role-playing or any form of storytelling”.¹⁶ To determine whether the initial campaigns of tabletop RPGs in our region were predominantly gamist, as in the case of the Polish *Kryształy Czasu* (transl. Crystals of Time, 1998), will require further research.¹⁷ Interviews we conducted indicate that the approaches varied greatly depending on the game and especially on the DM.

Dungeons & Dragons behind the Iron Curtain

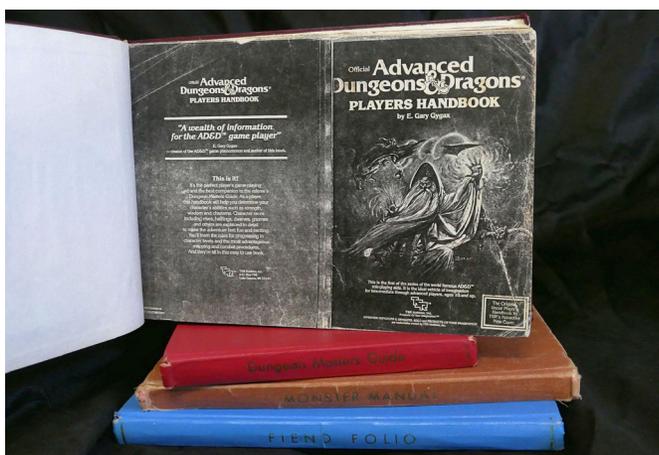
Reports of anyone playing tabletop RPGs in Czechoslovakia before 1989 are rare. Statistically, the few individuals who did play are not relevant, but these isolated cases at least somewhat alleviate the considerable delay in the population’s contact with games that had existed in the West for more than decade.

It appears that the first mention of D&D in communist Czechoslovakia was a sensationalist article in the magazine *100+1 zahraniční zajímavost* (transl. *100 + 1 Foreign Curiosity*) in July 1986. This report – purportedly lifted from the Italian magazine *Epoca* (6 years after

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- 11 MacKAY, D.: *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001, p. 4-5.
 - 12 COVER, J. G.: *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. London, Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010, p. 168.
 - 13 WATERS, D.: *What happened to Dungeons and Dragons?*. Released on 26th April 2004. [online]. [2022-05-04]. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3655627.stm>.
 - 14 EDWARDS, R.: *Simulationism: The Right to Dream*. Released on 29th January 2003. [online]. [2022-04-15]. Available at: <<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/15/>>.
 - 15 KIM, J. H.: *Threefold Simulationism Explained*. Released on 25th January 2004. [online]. [2022-05-04]. Available at: <<https://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/simulationism.html>>; WHITE, W. J.: *The Right to Dream of the Middle Ages: Simulating the Medieval in Tabletop RPGs*. In KLINE, D. T. (ed.): *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Age*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 18.
 - 16 TRESKA, M. J.: *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011, p. 67.
 - 17 MOCHOCKI, M., MOCHOCKA, A.: *Magia i Miecz Magazine: The Evolution of Tabletop RPG in Poland and its Anglo-Saxon Context*. In *Homo Ludens*, 2016, Vol. 1, No. 9, p.170-171.

its original publication in 1979) – became a rather curious instigator of the development of tabletop RPGs in Czechoslovakia. Titled “Číhá v dračím doupěti” (transl. *Lurks in the Dragon's Lair*) it discusses D&D as a dangerous mania responsible for the deaths of about fifty young Americans.¹⁸ When M. Klíma, aged 17 at the time, read it, he was left fascinated and curious. Having the opportunity to travel with his parents to Bristol, England, where his father lectured at university, M. Klíma purchased a D&D copy at the Games Workshop store, brought the game to Prague, and began playing it there with friends.¹⁹ D&D (similar to other Western titles) was not available on the market in communist Czechoslovakia, but a few more copies may have been brought by ‘shopping tourists’ such as M. Klíma, and then circulated similarly to sci-fi and fantasy literature or digital games from the West, only on a much smaller scale. The language barrier (the overwhelming majority of the population did not speak English) further hindered reception of Western media. As J. Švelch details, Czechoslovak gamers often acquired cracked and otherwise modified Western digital games without original packaging or manuals, leading to common misunderstandings.²⁰

Our research can account for two more parties playing D&D in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution. While M. Klíma brought his copy from the United Kingdom, brothers D. Lipšic and E. Lipšic carried their game all the way from Kuwait where their father worked as a doctor during the years 1983-1986. Upon their return to Bratislava, they played few sessions with their high school mates.²¹ At some time in 1987, another group of friends xeroxed their rulebook (Picture 1). D. Šmihula and P. Čejka attended the same gymnasium as the Lipšic brothers. M. Sústrik usually acted as DM and the fourth stable member was D. Šmihula's younger brother Vladislav. This core team played regularly throughout 1987-1988. Curiously, Prague and Bratislava cells played different versions of *D&D*. M. Klíma purchased the ‘red box’ Basic Set (1983 revision of the original game). The Lipšic brothers owned the 1979 edition of *Advanced D&D*. In the early 1990s, when V. Šmihula got to play M. Klíma's *Dragon's Lair* – which was largely a simplification of the basic D&D – he recalls it was “a bit of a disappointment” and soon went back to playing his copy of *AD&D*.²²



Picture 1: Hardcover binding containing the photo-copies of the AD&D handbook and add-ons. Collection of Vladislav Šmihula
Source: own processing

18 AURITI, S.: Číhá v dračím doupěti. In *100+1 zahraničná zajímavost*, 1986, Vol. 23, No. 14, p. 10.

19 KLÍMA, M.: Hry nejen na hrdiny. In 518, V. (ed.): *Kmeny 90: městské subkultura a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989-2000*. Prague: BiggBoss, 2016, p. 645.

20 ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. London, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018, p. 143-144.

21 LIPŠIC, E.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 27th April 2022. 2022.

22 ŠMIHULA, V.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.

If computer clubs provided a platform for distributing unauthorized copies of digital games in the 1980s, sci-fi/fantasy clubs did the same for literature.²³ Enthusiasts were not concerned with copyright or licensing agreements; after all, it was a matter of disseminating (xeroxed) copies of scarce items, especially within clubs. After 1989, these clubs also served as 'recruitment centres' for RPGs.

Dragon's Lair, Its Adoption, Players, and Reception

Amidst the transformation towards a liberal market economy M. Klíma rejected samizdat as a suitable method for spreading the translated D&D. He decided to apply formally to TSR (the original publisher of D&D) for a license, but the company never responded. With the opening of borders and the market, M. Klíma discovered the diversity of tabletop games and he opted for his own version of the RPG. Together with M. Benda, K. Papík and V. Kadlečková, he created Dragon's Lair, basically a simplified version of D&D.²⁴ M. Klíma initially published Dragon's Lair through an unaffiliated publisher. Its success allowed him to start his own publishing house *Altar* in 1991.

When M. Klíma and collective released Dragon's Lair in December 1990, they exploited the unique time window between the opening of the Czechoslovak economy after the Velvet Revolution and the 'avalanche' of Western RPGs such as original D&D, *Shadowrun*, German *Das Schwarze Auge* (transl. The Dark Eye) and others in the following years. The language barrier was a persisting issue, coupled with low purchasing power during the economic transformation, so their game represented a convenient and affordable alternative for the audience that after decades of neglect was starving for any fantasy-related content and did not understand much English or German, languages of the most widespread RPGs.

The first players of Dragon's Lair were M. Klíma's friends already introduced to D&D. Among them was R. Waschka from Brno, who had known M. Klíma from meetings of sci-fi fans. R. Waschka was also a member of the historical fencing society *Herold*, founded in 1983, where he met V. Chvátíl, another of the prime Dragon's Lair players and later prominent board game designer. According to R. Waschka, the society organised live events where participants enacted scripted narratives about life at medieval castles, "basically LARPs", completely unaware of contemporary Western LARP scenes or tabletop RPGs, considered as one of sources of inspiration for live action role-playing.²⁵ R. Waschka acquired a test copy of the original edition late in 1990 and started playing by Christmas. In January 1991, his group was staying in a country cottage where they played a continuous session for at least a week.²⁶ Members of the same community also soon founded the *Society of Friends*

23 ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018, p. 104.; KLÍMA, M.: Hry nejen na hrdiny. In 518, V. (ed.): *Kmeny 90: městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989-2000*. Prague : BiggBoss, 2016, p. 645.

24 KLÍMA, M.: Hry nejen na hrdiny. In 518, V. (ed.): *Kmeny 90: městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989-2000*. Prague : BiggBoss, 2016, p. 646.

25 LANCASTER, K.: *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainments With Interactive and Virtual Environments*. London, Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999, p. 34.

26 WASCHKA, R.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.; Remark by the authors: In the 1990s, V. Chvátíl also worked with M. Klíma in Altar Interactive, designing digital games, before he became famous for his his board games. R. Waschka eventually added to his many occupations digital games design as well.

of the Work of Mr. JRR Tolkien,²⁷ documenting how the inter-related subcultures of historical re-enactment groups, sci-fi and fantasy fandom and role-playing games, evolving in the West for decades, all collided in post-soviet countries in a few hectic years of the early 1990s.²⁸

In addition to tabletop RPGs being constrained to few isolated groups of 'hip' teenagers, Czechoslovakia before 1989 also had a very limited market of board games, consisting primarily of variations of *Parcheesi* and a local clone of *Monopoly*, called *Dostihy & sázky* (transl. *Horse Racing & Betting*) launched in 1984.²⁹ Some people played the original *Monopoly*, brought from Western countries.³⁰ Some even invented their own tabletop and board games, e.g., imitations of wargames played by brothers D. Šmihula and V. Šmihula, or paper imitations of *Monopoly*, producing an unspecified number of homebrew variations. The Šmihula brothers' attempts at imitating wargames were based mostly on inferring the gameplay from photos, since recreational wargaming was also virtually unknown in the Czechoslovak context.³¹

If R. Waschka serves as an example of links between historical re-enactment, fantasy fandom and role-playing games in the Czech part of the former federation, the case of D. Šmihula (b. 1972) and his group illustrates the connection between fantasy readership and RPGs in Slovakia. After reading J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*³² when he was seven, D. Šmihula became a life-long fantasy fan. The *Hobbit* was actually the only J. R. R. Tolkien title published in communist Czechoslovakia (the first Slovak translation in 1973, Czech in 1979).³³ Publishing J. R. R. Tolkien's other books and Western fantasy in general was not officially prohibited, rather discouraged. Local communist censors considered it low value, trashy writing, "unclassifiable under the categories of socialist literature", and they had ideological reservations against the genre, e.g., its use of "nonmaterialistic magic and miracles".³⁴ However, intellectuals and dissidents circulated various samizdat translations of *The Lord of the Ring*³⁵ and other works. In his article on J. R. R. Tolkien's works in the Soviet bloc D. Šmihula argues that communist suspicion towards fantasy was fully justified. Informal fantasy subculture "including players of role-playing games [...] in continuation of activities of environmentalists, underground music and literary movements, companies of historical fencing and romantic tramping indeed formed certain cultural background [that was] alternative against the official communist culture and ideology".³⁶

27 Remark by the authors: The officially used English version of the name of the community *Společnost přátel díla pana J.R.R. Tolkiena*.

28 Remark by the authors: The Society was founded in Brno in January 1992.: *O nás aneb historie a činnost Společnosti v kostce*. Released on 1st December 2008. [online]. [2022-04-20]. Available at: <<http://tolkien.cz/?page%20id=2#>>.

29 ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018, p. 112, 281.; Remark by the authors: JAVOZ, the company producing Horserace Betting, in 1980s also released Marshall and Spy (Maršál a špión), a clone of the abstract board game Stratego, or Phantom of Old Prague (Fantom staré Prahy), a variation of the Spiel des Jahre-awarded game Scotland Yard (1983).

30 BADAČ, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 11th April 2022. 2022.

31 ŠMIHULA, V.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.

32 For more information, see: TOLKIEN, J. R. R.: *The Hobbit*. London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937.

33 ŠMIHULA, D.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.; Remark by the authors: D. Šmihula is a lawyer, political scientist, journalist and writer, author of short sci-fi stories and fantasy novel *Obrancovia Liptova*.; See also: ŠMIHULA, D.: *Obrancovia Liptova*. Bratislava : Vydavateľstvo Hydra, 2021.

34 ŠMIHULA, D.: *Tolkienovo dielo v socialistickom táboře*. Released on 13th May 2018. [online]. [2022-04-17]. Available at: <<https://kultura.pravda.sk/kniha/clanok/469395-tolkienovo-dielo-v-socialistickom-tabore/>>.

35 For example, see: TOLKIEN, J. R. R.: *The Lord of the Rings*. London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968.; Remark by the authors: The individual volumes of the trilogy were published from 1954 to 1955. Unofficial Czech translation existed since 1979-1980.

36 ŠMIHULA, D.: *Tolkienovo dielo v socialistickom táboře*. Released on 13th May 2018. [online]. [2022-04-17]. Available at: <<https://kultura.pravda.sk/kniha/clanok/469395-tolkienovo-dielo-v-socialistickom-tabore/>>.

In 1990-1992, the Czech translation of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was finally released officially, together with a deluge of other fantasy titles. Also in 1990, a group of Czech sci-fi writers and fans started publishing *Ikarie*, the first local magazine devoted to sci-fi, fantasy and horror. In June 1990 *Ikarie* published an article by K. Papík, a sort of native ad recounting typical gameplay of a new RPG game, called *Dragon's Lair*.³⁷ Later, in the February 1991 issue, *Ikarie* carried an ad for *Dragon's Lair* (Picture 2), associating the game directly with the booming fantasy subculture and its most iconic staples in the contemporary Czechoslovak context: “[The game] belongs to the family of the original, oldest role-playing games – fantasy games. It brings to life the world of ancient legends and heroic epics, the world of the Lord of the Rings and Conan the Barbarian”.³⁸

Právě vychází první česká hra na hrdiny!

V tomto i v minulých číslech *Ikarie* jste se mohli dočíst o tom, co jsou to hry na hrdiny. Možná vám bylo líto, že nemůžete jít do obchodu a koupit si jednu, možná jste si mysleli, že si je nikdy nebudete moci zahrát. Naštěstí jste viděli budoucnost příliš černě. První česká hra na hrdiny právě vyšla a jmenuje se

DRAČÍ DOUPĚ.

Patří do rodiny původních, nejstarších her na hrdiny - fantasy her. Ožívá v ní svět dávných bájí a hrdinských eposů, svět Pána prstenů i Barbara Conana. Můžete se stát třeba udatným válečníkem nebo listivým kouzelníkem a prožít všechna dobrodružství, která vám vaše fantazie prožít dovolí.

Zatím se jedná o první díl - Pravidla pro začátečníky. Společnost ALTAR, která hru DRAČÍ DOUPĚ vydává, uvažuje o vydání dalšího dílu

- Pravidel pro pokročilé - v první polovině roku 1991.

Hru DRAČÍ DOUPĚ si můžete objednat na adrese:

ALTAR
Korunní 94
101 00 Praha 10

(Pozn. red.: Musíme prozradit, že ukázkové dobrodružství, připojené ke hře Dračí doupe, napsala Vilma Kadlečková, oblíbená autorka všech SF fanů! Její jméno dává záruku, že ve hře najdete napětí, dobrodružství a patričnou dávku tajemna.)

Picture 2: Print advertisement for *Dragon's Lair* in *Ikarie*, 1991. It contains no information about price, only the address for placing an order

Source: Dračí doupe. [Print advertisement]. In *Ikarie*, 1991, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 53.

Because *Ikarie* was also distributed in Slovakia, this was the source that first brought the game to the attention of many Slovak fantasy fans. For example, two of the interviewees, M. Badač from Bratislava and J. Krištofovič from Trnava, cite it as their source of information and subsequent decision to order the copy from the newly founded publishing house Altar.³⁹ However, conditions were rapidly changing. The fantasy boom also led

37 See: PAPIK, K.: Brána do jiného světa. In *Ikarie*, 1990, Vol. 1, No. 6, p. 46-47.

38 Dračí doupe. [Print advertisement]. In *Ikarie*, 1991, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 53.

39 BADAČ, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 11th April 2022. 2022.; KRIŠTOFOVIČ, J.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.

to the rise of specialised genre bookshops, like the one in Bratislava, called *Arrakis* and originally set-up in the changing room of the library at Klariská street. Its frequent visitor M. Sedlačko (b. 1979), then barely teenage, was impressed by the displayed copy of the rulebook, so he pooled money with his primary school classmates to get it.⁴⁰

While a background in board games, fantasy literature or historical re-enactment can be seen as conforming to similar Western standards of how one could become a RPG player, M. Sústrik and P. Čejka, members of D. Šmihula's AD&D party, represent another specific feature of growing up in the late communist Czechoslovakia. As members of the first young generation introduced to Western computer games, not only they *played* computer games before playing tabletop RPGs, but they were *aware of* computer games before knowing about the existence of RPGs. M. Sústrik and P. Čejka became also involved in designing their own amateur computer games as members of the Sybilasoft collective, producing their first games in 1987, the same year when they allegedly started playing AD&D with D. Šmihula.⁴¹

Like their Western counterparts, early adopters of RPGs in Czechoslovakia were teenagers or young adults.⁴² In the United States in the 1960s Dave Arneson discovered wargaming as a teenager and D. Wesely as a university student. M. Klíma (b. 1969) became aware of D&D aged seventeen and he played it with his peers. The Lipšic brothers were born in 1972; members of the D. Šmihula group were around the same age (mostly born in 1972-1973) and did not continue playing after graduating from high school. Writing about the booming RPG scene in the United States in the 1980s, G. A. Fine described a typical gamer as being in his late teens or early twenties, while at the same time the median age of new players was decreasing.⁴³ Early Slovak players of *Dragon's Lair* like M. Badač and M. Sedlačko in Bratislava also started as teenagers. Our interviewees cited similar reasons for disengaging from the hobby as did G. A. Fine's subjects – graduation, marriages or jobs.⁴⁴

Due to its accessibility, *Dragon's Lair* quickly expanded to smaller cities and towns around the country. J. Krištofovič (b. 1972) founded a group with his younger schoolmates at high school in Trnava in early 1991, M. Sedlačko usually played at clubs or cultural centres in Bratislava, but also in Šamorín, a small town on the outskirts of the capital.⁴⁵ I. Alákša founded a group in Šaľa, another small town in southwest Slovakia. Initially, it was just a duo, where he was a GM and the other boy played up to five characters. Nonetheless, in 1993, I. Alákša started the first Slovak fanzine for RPG players called *Meč a mágia* (transl. *Sword and Sorcery*), producing 12 issues by 1995. In 1997 it transformed into the first professional fantasy magazine called simply *Fantázia* (transl. *Fantasy*), published until 2011.⁴⁶

40 SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.; Remark by the authors: The interviewee, nowadays a political and social scientist, dates this event to 1992 or 1993.

41 ŠVELCH, J.: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. London, Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018, p. 193-194.; Remark by the authors: Sybilasoft collective included S. Hrdá and brothers M. Hlaváč and J. Hlaváč. Their games were mostly text adventures, the genre that was in turn directly influenced by tabletop RPGs.; AARSETH, E. J.: *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MA : The John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 98.; SÚSTRIK, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 26th April 2022. 2022.

42 TESAŘ, A.: *Elfové a draci pro každého*. In *A2*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 26. [online]. [2022-05-10]. Available at: <<https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/26/elfove-a-draci-pro-kazdeho>>.; Remark by the authors: Klíma in 1994 broke members of Hexaedr up into two main groups: players around 14 years and high-school/college students.; See also: NĚMEČEK, T.: *Draci studenta Klímy*. In *Mladý svět*, 1994, Vol. 36, No. 14, p. 14.

43 FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy – Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 39, 257.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

45 KRIŠTOFOVIČ, J.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.; SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.

46 ALÁKŠA, I.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 16th May 2022. 2022.

It is not possible to determine at this stage of research how many Dragon's Lair copies were distributed in the Slovak part of the federation or how many players there were. It is probably safe to assume that it was a small percentage of the total numbers. Our interviewees were mostly concentrated in cities and towns of west Slovakia, having the closest ties to both the Czech Republic and Austria, but due to the qualitative character of this preliminary survey we are unable to say with any certainty how popular RPGs there were elsewhere in the country.

Mirroring Western gamers in yet another aspect, early participants in RPGs in Czechoslovakia seem to be overwhelmingly male. Our interviewees played almost exclusively with other boys. Only R. Waschka (b. 1968) confirmed already having female players in his group in 1991, maybe also because he and his group were in their twenties, a few years older than typical participants were.⁴⁷ For example, M. Sedlačko was startled to see the first girl in another group, older as well.⁴⁸ J. Průcha from České Budějovice recalls having met female participants only after 2000, D. Šmihula registered an influx of women into Bratislava fantasy fandom after 2000.⁴⁹ These accounts seem consistent with G. A. Fine's findings of around 90% male dominance in US fantasy role-playing in the 1980s, with recent figures suggesting that D&D is less male-dominated than it used to be.⁵⁰

The reasons Fine cited for the absence of women, i.e. their attributes, the structural characteristics of the game, and the nature of recruitment into this subsociety, were not lost in translation.⁵¹ Sci-fi and fantasy fandom were not virtually all-male hobbies like wargaming, but men were still in the majority. Some notable exceptions coming from Czech sci-fi clubs include V. Kadlečková and J. Vorlová who both substantially contributed to the development of Dragon's Lair and its publisher Altar. Sexist and chauvinist attitudes of role-playing gamers documented by G. A. Fine were ubiquitous among Czechoslovak participants as well. According to J. Průcha, when discussing playing with women, people were saying that the game "can't be for girls, that girls don't have imagination, they are not interested in fantastic worlds, they are more oriented towards reality and don't like fights".⁵² Some groups even discouraged male members from playing female characters. M. Sedlačko recalls that it was certainly taboo, because fantasy role-playing was seen as a form of psychotherapy, not merely entertainment, and playing a female character would thus be inauthentic, "would betray the game's ethos".⁵³ However, not all groups held identical prohibitive views.

Dissemination and reception of RPGs in Czechoslovakia (and both succession states since 1993) seems to be devoid of one notable accompanying phenomenon occurring in the USA: moral panic over the dangers of role-playing games throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Moral entrepreneurs aligned with the New Christian Right accused RPGs of promoting Satanism and witchcraft and thus corrupting the impressionable youth, sometimes with deadly consequences.⁵⁴ Except for the sensationalist piece from 1986 mentioned above, post-communist national media, conservative circles or society in general paid very

47 WASCHKA, R.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.

48 SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.

49 PRŮCHA, J.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.; ŠMIHULA, D.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 19th April 2022. 2022.

50 FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy – Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 41.; TANEN, A.: *7 Dungeons & Dragons statistics you should know about*. [online]. [2022-05-12]. Available at: <<https://dicecove.com/dnd-statistics/>>.

51 FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy – Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 62-71.

52 PRŮCHA, J.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.; FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy – Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 64.

53 SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.

54 LAYCOCK, J. P.: *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland, CA : University of California Press, 2015, p. 76-176.; For more information, see: BYERS, A.: The Satanic Panic and Dungeons & Dragons: A Twenty- Five-year Retrospective. In BYERS, A., CROCCO, F. (eds.): *The Role-Playing Society. Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*. Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016, p. 22-45.

little attention to the new fast-spreading hobby. However, this view has yet to be verified by a further contemporary media study. Our respondents almost invariably denied any moral concerns from parents or other authorities over their participation in RPG sessions. Reactions, if there were any, exhibited rather incomprehension, bemusement, and occasionally slight ridicule. Dragon's Lair was "entertainment for nerds", "geeks" or "weirdos", but it was not scapegoated as an agent behind the scandalous behaviour of deviant youth.⁵⁵

Discerning reasons for this development goes beyond the scope of this study. Provisionally, we can only point to the hecticness of early 1990s in the post-communist Czechoslovakia, mentioned in previous sections. An abrupt economic, political and social liberalisation after years of inertia brought a proliferation of heretofore virtually unknown phenomena, some of them considerably harmful, such as organised crime or illicit drug use. Suddenly, there were many far more visible (and scary) subsocieties or subcultures than nerdy gamers such as punks, skinheads and ultras, bikers, and gangsters. There was simply too much to worry about. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that, as our interviewees recall, their parents were only "glad that we don't take drugs".⁵⁶ Through youth leisure centres, centres of culture or community clubs, various municipalities demonstrably lent institutional support to RPG enthusiasts, indicating that the activity was not generally perceived as maleficent.⁵⁷

Between Consumerism and Participation

The commercial success of Dragon's Lair has been well documented. M. Klíma claims that the first 5,000 copies sold out in half a year.⁵⁸ M. Bronec, former executive of the publishing house Altar, estimates that by the mid-1990s around 60,000 copies of the game were sold and perhaps 100,000 people were active players (in the country of 15 million).⁵⁹ In comparison, the original D&D grew much slower, taking almost a year for the first 1,000 copies to sell out and reaching 1 million players only by the 1980s.⁶⁰ The rapid expansion of Dragon's Lair indicates a pre-existing demand just waiting for a suitable product. M. Klíma actually helped to fuel this demand because he both founded *Hexaedr*, a national club for RPG players, and (as mentioned) advertised the game in *Ikarie*, months before its official release. By 1994, *Hexaedr* had 3,500 members.⁶¹

As we focus our research particularly on the player's experience, the 1990s interest us in terms of building a player base and gaming communities. If some theorists claim of the tabletop RPG that "they complicate our understanding of the relationship between authors and audiences, and our definitions of these terms", this was even more so in the atmosphere of the 1990s, in which companies like Altar were just learning ways of commerce and attempted to exploit the creativity of their audience for content

55 PRŮCHA, J.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.; BADAČ, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 11th April 2022. 2022.

56 ANTALEC, I.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 18th April 2022. 2022.

57 SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.

58 KLÍMA, M.: Hry nejen na hrdiny. In 518, V. (ed.): *Kmeny 90: městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989-2000*. Prague : BiggBoss, 2016, p. 651.

59 ŠPLÍCHAL, P.: Po fantasy byl po revoluci hlad. In *A2*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 26. [online]. [2022-05-10]. Available at: <<https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/26/po-fantasy-byl-po-revoluci-hlad>>.

60 FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy – Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.15, 26.

61 NĚMEČEK, T.: Draci studenta Klímy. In *Mladý svět*, 1994, Vol. 36, No. 14, p. 14.

production.⁶² We can understand this in terms of participatory culture, i.e. not only culture interpreting meaning but also creating it, while still distinguishing between active participants who are involved in creating social and cultural content and those who use but do not create such content.⁶³ Gameplay in its various forms can be seen as a form of participatory culture that was encouraged directly by game designers. One of the important aspects is following or modifying the rules by players. In computer RPGs, software can quickly work with inputs and AI can be very sophisticated, but the gameplay is still limited to what designers originally intended and implemented. It cannot evolve unlike the ever-changing nature of collective imagination that is working on top of prepared layout in tabletop RPGs where rules provide objective measurement of success, but the gameplay depends on a DM and players. Computer RPG designers can also encourage participation by integrating modding options or other editing tools. However, it is participation of a different kind than spontaneous, in-person and real-time interactions and inventions of tabletop RPG gameplay. The aforementioned gamist system was tied to the so-called “hack-and-slash” school of playing. T. Toles-Patkin compares this to B. Sutton-Smith's typology of games based on age of the players. In this case, it is determined not only by the age and she connects this straightforward style of play to the low experience level of the players.⁶⁴

Our interviewees' accounts vary in this matter and the sample is not sufficient to make a statement about the prevalence of a particular play style, but we can say that there was some inclination to hack-and-slash style consisting of rooms of enemies waiting for confrontation with players as described by D. M. Ewalt: “In the very first room, they discovered and defeated a nest of scorpions; in the second, they fought a gang of kobolds – short subterranean lizard-men. They also found their first treasure, a chest full of copper coins, but it was too heavy to carry”.⁶⁵ This corresponds with the early style of play as described in our interviews. Some of our respondents recalled adventures in continuous rooms with non-functioning and often non-realistic ecosystems containing only monsters to deal with. For example, M. Sedlačko was critical of campaigns involving pure “cave eradication” and alleged that some players who felt restricted by official rules started to develop their own set of house rules and even completely new systems.⁶⁶ Other accounts confirm this notion. A. Tesař assesses the Dragon's Lair game system as “not elaborate”, leaving much of the gameplay to the “imagination and dramatic abilities of players, especially the DM”. Numerous fanzines often contained attempts to fix dysfunctional rules.⁶⁷ J. Olt considers the main difference between D&D and Dragon's Lair to be that “Lair's rules were often incomplete, looser and open to every possible modification and house rules”.⁶⁸

Tabletop RPGs are sets of interactions defined by the rules. In theory, an omniscient dungeon master oversees adhering to the rules, while the story can be influenced and co-developed by players who sometimes have little to no knowledge about the rules and learn them from the DM while playing. Why in theory? In the current understanding of tabletop RPG, the focus is towards the narrative and improvisation of the players, while the rules do not have to be taken strictly by the book. “For tabletop GMs, in-depth knowledge

62 WHITE, W. J. et al.: *Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. In ZAGAL, J. P., DETERDING, S. (eds.): *Role-Playing Game Studies*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 67.

63 JENKINS, H.: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 1992, p. 22-23.

64 TOLES-PATKIN, T.: Rational Coordination in the Dungeon. In *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1986, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 7.

65 EWALT, D. M.: *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It*. New York, NY : Simon & Schuster, 2013, p. 65-66.

66 SEDLAČKO, M.: *RPG in Czechoslovakia*. [Personal interview]. Released on 13th April 2022. 2022.

67 TESAŘ, A.: *Elfové a draci pro každého*. In *A2*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 26. [online]. [2022-05-10]. Available at: <<https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/26/elfove-a-draci-pro-kazdeho>>.

68 OLT, J.: *Role-playing v zemi chatařů*. In *A2*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 26. [online]. [2022-05-10]. Available at: <<https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/26/role-playing-v-zemi-chataru>>.

and enforcement of the rules are not only unnecessary, but in many cases undesirable”.⁶⁹ In the development of the first RPG, the rules formed an objective and universally valid commitment in order to restrict the decision-making by the GM. However, as early as the 1980s G. Gygax promoted the notion that rules do not determine the whole gameplay, but “merely provide guidelines for the DM to go about setting up these scenarios”.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, his idea was better realized by the simplified localization of his game, a typically shoddy product of the transforming post-communist culture and economy of the former Czechoslovakia.

Conclusion

Compared to digital games, tabletop role-playing games had very limited reach in communist Czechoslovakia. The first contribution of our study is in presenting evidence that D&D was not played only by M. Klíma and his circle in Prague. There were at least two other consecutive groups that played AD&D version in Bratislava. Some members were at the same time among the pioneers of digital game design in Slovakia.

However, apart from a few isolated groups of players in the largest cities, the public was generally unaware of the phenomenon that was already very popular in the West. The real breakthrough came only after the Velvet Revolution in the early 1990s with the release of a localized clone of D&D, called *Dragon's Lair*. The game was an instant success unlike in the USA, where its growth was initially much slower. This rapid proliferation is linked to the simultaneous boom of Western fantasy literature that was until then largely unavailable in Czechoslovakia, restricted by the communist censorship. We conclude that the release of *Dragon's Lair* tapped into the pre-existing demand and concur with other authors who see it as a “paramount substitutionary product” for the audience hindered by the low purchase power and language barrier.⁷¹ Surveying some of the early adopters, we have documented how *Dragon's Lair* was disseminated in the Slovak part of the republic. The study thereafter examines players and their practices. Interviews indicate that participants shared many characteristics with early gamers in the West; they were mostly male, teenagers or young adults, or students. They also displayed similar interests such as participating in sci-fi or fantasy fandom, historical re-enactment and LARP-like activities, or board games.

Considering the reception of RPGs, our survey indicates that due to various factors it did not include the aspect of moral panic, as was the case in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Although parents and the general public apparently did not comprehend much of the activity, our sources indicate that it was appreciated as pro-social rather than anti-social and supported by municipal institutions and authorities providing spaces and infrastructure for gamers (perhaps to keep them off the streets). This assessment needs to be verified by the extensive study of contemporary media. With its substitutionary and sketchy character, *Dragon's Lair* encouraged a considerable investment of creativity on the part of the players, emphasizing the association between RPGs and participatory culture. This unique configuration functioned a few years into the 1990s, until the standardization and diversification of the RPG market.

69 BARTON, M., STACKS, S.: *Dungeons and Desktops. The History of Computer Role-playing Games*. Boca Raton, FL : CRC Press, 2019, p. 12.

70 TOLES-PATKIN, T.: Rational Coordination in the Dungeon. In *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1986, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 3.

71 TESÁŘ, A.: Elfové a draci pro každého. In *A2*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 26. [online]. [2022-05-10]. Available at: <<https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/26/elfove-a-draci-pro-kazdeho>>.

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