

Švelch, Jaroslav: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press 2018. ISBN: 9780262038843; 400 S.

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Usually, scholars who work on gaming history focus on the games themselves, game developers and gamers. Jaroslav Švelch's book, which investigates the gaming culture in state-socialist Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, substantially differs from that template and delivers a much broader image of cultural and social life during the last years of socialist rule. Such an approach is one of the strongest points of this monograph, since it makes Švelch's investigation accessible and interesting for a broader range of scholars who do not have any particular interest in gaming history or even in the broader field of digital culture history. This book is relevant not only for the field of Eastern European history, but also more broadly for the cultural and media history of Europe in the late Cold War period.

In the introduction, the author claims that „the book aims to cover more than just games. I will branch out to political and economic history, to histories of technology, foreign trade, education, labor, leisure, gender relations, interior design, and even agriculture“ (pp. xxii–xxiii). The book indeed includes even agriculture, since Švelch discusses how the state-owned rural co-operatives supported the development of computer clubs. I would like to encourage scholars with some interest in everyday life under state socialism to read this book, since it offers a valuable and lively insight into Czechoslovakia in the 1980s.

With his background in media studies, Švelch provides a fresh and theoretically informed discussion on the cultural history of gaming as well as, more broadly, computer use in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, he manages to avoid the conventional view of the Eastern Bloc as a *sui generis* cultural, social and economic system not comparable with the currents in any other geographical regions from that historical period. Firstly, he insightfully

discusses how local gaming culture became embedded in the local Czechoslovak culture of the 1980s, particularly in the culture of *vnye* (Alexei Yurchak), the spaces of retreat symbolized by weekend escapes to the *chata*, a rural cottage house. Playing, or even making, computer games offered an alternative form of retreat from the bleak realities of everyday life under state socialism. Young computer aficionados did not need to retreat to the *chata* since, as Švelch convincingly argues, a home computer offered them another form of retreat through „imaginative travels to the West“ (p. 154). While investigating how such retreats using home computers fitted into the broader cultural pattern of retreating from everyday life under omnipresent communist propaganda, Švelch compares the gaming culture in Czechoslovakia to the cultural life of disillusioned youth in the Soviet Union discussed by Alexei Yurchak in his seminal work „Everything Was Forever.“¹ Švelch convincingly draws parallels between colorful artistic experiments carried out in private spaces by Soviet youth, and creative experiments made by young computer aficionados in Czechoslovakia. In both cases, such retreats included building alternative worlds in order to, at least temporarily, escape from the world of red banners, May Day celebrations and newspeak in mass-media.

Secondly, Švelch shows that some features of local gaming culture were not only elements of the experience of living in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, but were rather elements of peripheral and marginal experiences (p. 221). I would like to highlight this important distinction, since his insightful remarks on digital culture on the peripheries of highly developed countries of North-Western Europe in the 1980s make this book an important read for scholars interested in media history in general. As Švelch shows, with the lack of Western-style consumer culture, an organized retail system, and a software industry, games were not perceived as commercial products and „Czechoslovak coders, not limited by industry standard, were free to use their programs as vehicles for personal or community messages“ (p. 190). Švelch

¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton 2006.

dedicates a whole book chapter to his investigations of *textovka* – locally-made text adventure games. Such a format offered authors the possibility of creating ingenious stories that capture the *zeitgeist* of living in 1980s Czechoslovakia by merging fascination with Western popular culture with the exposure to communist propaganda and the currents of the Velvet Revolution. The most notable example of such a game is probably „Indiana Jones in Wenceslas Square“ (pp. 206–209), a *textovka* that tells a story about Indiana Jones suddenly appearing at the mass protests at Wenceslas Square during the early stage of the Velvet Revolution and, instead of having to confront the Nazis as he does in the movies, he has to confront Czechoslovak riot police.

It is particularly important to note that Švelch also extensively investigates how Czechoslovak gamers managed to obtain computers at all. The socialist state actively promoted the concept of introducing computers in both work spaces and households. However, besides some experimental small-run productions of locally designed computers, the socialist economy was incapable of mass-scale production of home computers. Therefore, the Czechs and Slovaks, who could learn from state media about this new exciting gadget, sought a way to obtain computers, primarily the low priced *ZX Spectrum*, from the West through a range of mostly semi-formal channels. It is worth emphasizing that Švelch meticulously tracks down such channels and discusses the complexities of importing home technologies from the West. Hence, the book title can also be interpreted as „gaming the Iron Curtain“ in terms of developing creative ways to bring the *ZX Spectrums* from the West by circumventing, or „gaming“, complex state bureaucracy. I am highlighting the issue of importing computers to communist Czechoslovakia to note that such investigation makes this book an important contribution to the history of technology and economic history. This book offers a valuable discussion on the complex grassroots mechanisms of organizing the flow of technologies and consumer products across the Iron Curtain.

The book is based on a broad range of historical sources: analysis of software pro-

grams preserved in digital form, interviews with computer hobbyists and content analysis of printed sources, such as computer and technical magazines, as well as ephemeral computer-club bulletins and even personal correspondence obtained by the author.

In media studies, there is a tradition of studying marginal and peripheral experiences of accessing media cultures outside of Europe. There are numerous studies that cover media cultures in the Global South, for instance Nigeria, Brazil or India.² Švelch’s book offers valuable insights into such „marginal and peripheral“ experiences in the heart of Europe. However, as mentioned above, this book not only addresses such local media culture, but also extensively discusses how it was situated in the broader cultural, social and economic currents of the 1980s. To summarize, I can not only recommend this book as valuable reading for a range of scholars interested in the history of state socialism, but also for those who are eager to learn more about the experience of living in European peripheries where limited access to consumer goods and media texts drove the creation of a unique local culture that merged the fascination of action movies with the parodies of communist propaganda.

Patryk Wasiak über Švelch, Jaroslav: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.09.2019.

² Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise. Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham 2008; Lars Eckstein / Anja Schwarz (eds.), *Postcolonial Piracy. Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South*, London 2014.