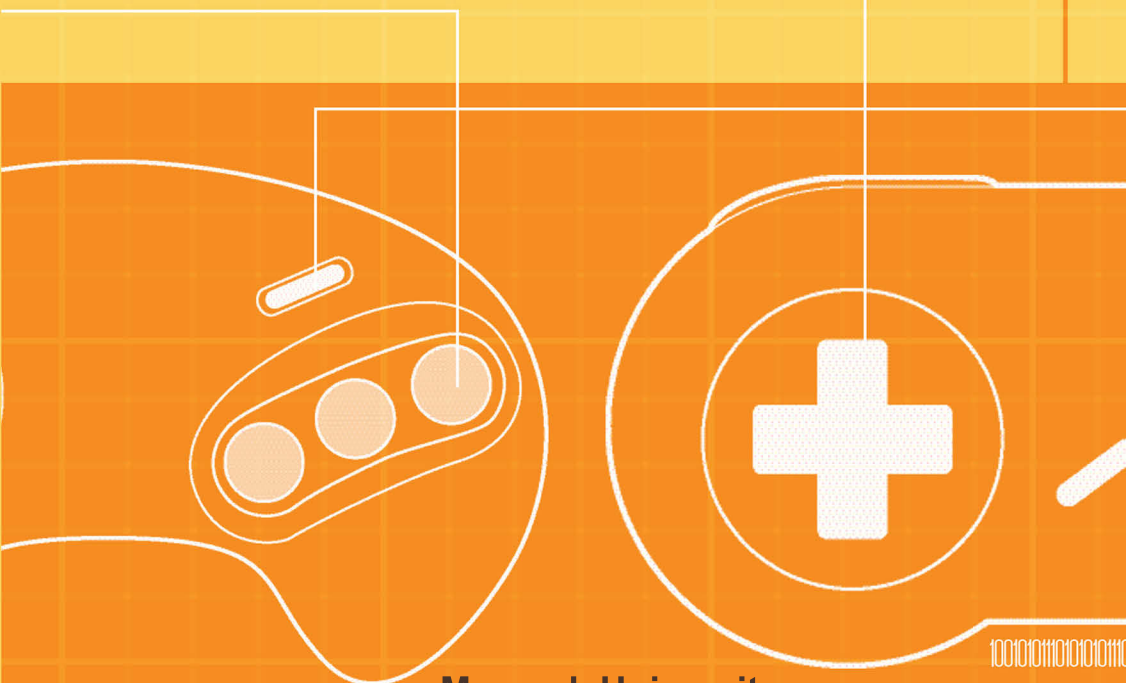# New Perspectives In Game Studies:

Proceedings of the Central and European Game Studies Conference

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New Perspectives in Game Studies: Proceedings of the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference

Brno 2014

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Introduction

On October 10–11, 2014, around 150 people gathered at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic to discuss and learn about digital games. It was the first annual Central and Eastern European Game Studies (CEEGS) conference – and it marked an important step in the integration of digital games research across the region. It was the first time when game scholars from different parts of Central and Eastern Europe met to share their research, and the start of many fruitful collaborations, both within the region and with our Western European colleagues.

However, to get to this point, game studies in the region had had to overcome numerous obstacles. First, the discipline had to become accepted as a serious and legitimate discipline. This took a little more time than in the U.S. or Scandinavia. In the case of the Czech Republic, we had at least two courses in game studies at two different universities and at least one course in game development in 2009. The students' reactions were enthusiastic, and the hosting departments were satisfied. Secondly, there had to be an infrastructure that would allow people to organize such a conference. Fortunately, by that time, our academic organization, the MU Game Studies, already existed. MU Game Studies (short for Masaryk University Game Studies) was founded as a nonprofit association in 2009 by the enthusiastic students of game studies classes at Masaryk University – along with Jaroslav Švelch, their instructor at the time. Later on, more members from other schools started joining the group, while some of the students started working on their Ph.D.'s and became instructors and scholars themselves. MU Game Studies has since organized numerous

events, provided help and advice to game studies students and held a number of national game studies conferences. In late 2013, the MU Game Studies crew were debating where to go next. We realized how sad it was that we knew next to nothing about what was happening in game studies in Poland, Hungary, or other countries of the region. Out of the discussion arose the plan that next time, we would organize a larger international conference with formalized peer reviews, a call for papers addressed to an international audience, and respected keynote speakers. Although we had next to no budget, we persevered.

Along the way, we were greeted with a great amount of interest and support. Professor Espen Aarseth from the IT University of Copenhagen, one of the founders of the discipline and the editor-in-chief of the *Game Studies* journal, accepted our invitation to become a keynote speaker – a choice fitting the foundational spirit of the conference. He has since remained on the CEEGS team as the chair of the "humanistic theory of digital games" section. We were overwhelmed by the number of abstracts we received and decided to go for a 2-track conference instead of the planned 1-track program. We welcomed over 120 registered participants (organizers and volunteers not included) and around 50 speakers from both academia and game development, including people coming from Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, Austria, China and Turkey. The atmosphere was inspiring and relaxed, and thanks to our enthusiastic volunteers, everything went smoothly.

The topics ranged from history to theory, from empirical studies to applied research. Quite importantly, many of the presentations focused on subjects related to Central and Eastern European gaming experiences, histories and developers. As such, the conference started building a regional identity of game studies in Central and Eastern Europe, and helped us to discover common themes in our research. The first day of the conference concluded with a panel discussion about the state of the art of game studies in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Scandinavia (represented by Espen Aarseth).

On the second day of the conference, academics were joined by practitioners from the areas of game design and development. It featured a captivating keynote by Sos Sosowski of McPixel fame, who narrated his personal story of being an Eastern European developer, and a number of other talks which represented the cutting edge of the regional game design, marketing and publishing. And despite the puzzlement of some developers over the academic pursuit of

game studies, a fruitful exchange followed, proving that there is enormous value in the meetings of academics and professionals.

The success of the conference encouraged us to continue. To maintain the international spirit of the conference, it will from now on travel between various cities in the region. In 2015, the place is Krakow, Poland, and the date is 21–24 October. And as the dates themselves suggest, the conference is growing.

The papers in this volume represent the diversity of the papers presented at the 2014 conference. Acknowledging different publication strategies in different countries and departments, we made the participation in the proceedings volume optional, and we worked closely with the authors to deliver polished versions of their talks. The rest of the presentations are available as video recordings on MU Game Studies' YouTube channel, which is accessible from our website at *gamestudies.cz*.

In the first paper in this volume, Stanisław Krawczyk offers a sophisticated look at the social history of gaming in Central and Eastern Europe. In his piece *"You must gather your party before venturing forth"*, he analyzes the foundational role that RPG games from around 2000 had in Polish digital game culture and contributes to our limited academic knowledge about the development of gaming communities in the region.

Tomasz Majkowski's paper *Grotesque realism and carnality* is a great example of novel approaches to the medium of video games which build on the continental and Central and Eastern European tradition of literary theory and philosophy. Majkowski's Bakhtinian take on the carnivalesque in digital games is both inspiring and provocative.

Justyna Janik contributed a detailed analysis of the output of the Czech studio Amanita Design. In the paper entitled *The cluster worlds of imagination*, she applies the theoretical instruments of art history and theory of art to games like *Samorost* and treats them as a specific form of collage that subverts the drive for photorealism present in commercial blockbuster titles.

In his paper *Negotiating a glitch: identifying and using glitches in video games with microtransactions*, Jan Švelch explores the phenomenon of glitch and defines it as a never ending process of negotiation among the players, the press and developers. The text examines the discourse about glitches in two well-chosen cases – the infinite respawn glitch from *Dead Space 3* and the missile glitch in *Mass Effect 3*.

In her paper *Potentials of games in the field of urban planning*, Ezster Tóth aptly

presents several examples of urban games designed to raise awareness of urban planning processes, or to foster citizen engagement, as well as urban games utilized in education. In Tóth's view, these games support decision-making and public participation in multidimensional planning processes and can be valuable contributions to the evolution of public spaces.

Zdenko Mago proposes to analyze *Tetris* as a tool of gamification. His research is rooted in a historical understanding of the game and the theoretical foundations of gamification. In his contribution, Mago focused on participants' perception of commercials which apply the principles of gamification and questions the effectiveness of using such practices for marketing purposes.

Mateusz Felczak's paper *Narratives of spectatorship: e-sports in Poland* fulfils the aim of the conference to promote research of gaming cultures with the region. He describes the electronic sport tournament event, the Intel Extreme Masters World Championship finals, which took place in Katowice, Poland. The paper discusses the transformation of videogame spectatorship due to the development of online streaming.

Before we invite you to read the papers, we would like to thank all institutions and organizations who made the event possible: Masaryk University in Brno and its Faculty of Social Studies, Charles University in Prague's Faculty of Social Sciences, the Brno-Center district, and the Regional Museum in Litomyšl. Most of all, we want to express our gratitude to all of our volunteers, colleagues and reviewers who dedicated many precious hours of their lives to the conference.

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Tomáš Bártek, Masaryk University in Brno
Jan Miškov, Masaryk University in Brno
Jaroslav Švelch, Charles University in Prague
Zdeněk Záhora, chairman, MU Game Studies

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"You Must Gather Your Party Before Venturing Forth": Why Did Computer Games From Around 2000 Become So Important in Poland?

Stanisław Krawczyk[1]
University of Warsaw

Abstract

The turn of the 21ˢᵗ century was a significant period for computer games in Poland, especially in the roleplaying and strategy genres. The titles published at that time include *Fallout*, *Starcraft*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Heroes of Might & Magic III*, or *Planescape: Torment*. This paper seeks to explain why these and other similar games had an important impact on the identities of many Polish players and contributed to the national gaming culture. Several social and cultural factors are analyzed, such as the players' sociodemographic characteristics, the historical development of cRPG (computer roleplaying games) and RTS (real-time strategy) games, the role of Polish publishers, and the significance of technologies. The methodology of the study draws from Wendy Griswold's cultural diamond heuristic, which emphasizes the benefits of investigating cultural objects (in this case, games) in relation to their producers, players, and the general social context. In general theoretical terms, the paper is grounded in cultural sociology.[2]

Keywords: computer games, cRPG, Polish players, strategy games

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Introduction

The phrase "You must gather your party before venturing forth" comes from *Baldur's Gate*, a hugely successful cRPG (computer roleplaying game) first released in 1998. In the Polish version, the words read by the well-known actor Piotr Fronczewski (*Przed wyruszeniem w drogę należy zebrać drużynę*) became a generational classic. A four-second YouTube copy of the recording[3] has been viewed about 150,000 times from June 2010 to March 2015, and typing the phrase into a search engine will yield hundreds if not thousands of unique results.

This paper aims to demonstrate how that has been made possible. But the study is also about many other games from the same period – the games that numerous Polish players still remember with great fondness.

As a matter of fact, I once played a good number of those titles myself. It still strikes me how quickly the feeling of mutual comprehension appears when I talk to friends about those games. And sometimes the memories come at the strangest moments. For instance, after my friend and I talked to a guard of one national park in 2011, the friend said this while we were leaving the park: "I wish we had asked her if she would join the party". A conversation on the *Baldur's Gate* series followed promptly, eventually taking a good part of the day.

Personal experiences can be a valuable resource for social researchers (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2010, pp. 31–35). However, they may also narrow down the scholars' perspectives, often in a subconscious way. This is why it is important to define the standpoint from which the role of past computer games will be described here[4], even though the study is not an instance of autoethnography.

As was true for many men born in Poland in the 1980s, I developed an interest in cRPGs and strategy games in my teenage years. The experience of this period has shaped my future preferences: cRPGs are still my favorite genre. Such a biography may easily encourage a researcher to overemphasize the social importance and outreach of studied games. It ought to be stated explicitly,

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[3] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph0yhtZDWIQ, or by searching YouTube for the Polish phrase.

[4] 'Past games' and 'older games' serve as handy synonyms for cRPG and strategy games published in Poland at the turn of the 21st century. The expression 'computer games' is used throughout the paper to underscore the fact that it was generally personal computers that Poles used to play strategy and roleplaying games at that time.

then, that the paper does not present a comprehensive view of all Poles playing on computers around the year 2000. Instead, the study is mostly concerned with players belonging to specific social categories (briefly speaking, with well-educated young men). In addition, the paper focuses on heavily engaged gamers much more than on casual players.

The current work is related theoretically and methodologically to various sociological examinations of how cultural production is grounded in the social context (e.g., Peterson & Anand, 2004; Santoro, 2008). Speaking more broadly, the paper inspects games from the standpoint of cultural sociology – an increasingly frequent approach in sociological research that builds on the following assumption: "[C]ulture, social life, and social institutions are mutually implicated. Following any single strand of cultural analysis is likely to quickly open out into a broad set of considerations: of personal relationships, everyday life, economic institutions and their cultural bases, public etiquette, transnational differences, technology and culture, global diffusion, and more" (Hall, Grindstaff, & Lo, 2010, p. 2). In terms of its subject matter, the paper is related not just to game studies, but also to media archeology and fan studies.

To avoid confusion, it should be stressed that the key question of this paper is not "How was it possible for those games to appear?" but "How was it possible for those games to become so important?" In other words, the paper concentrates on reception rather than reflection[5].

The next sections present the dominant social and demographic traits of the fans of older games, describe a number of indicators of the long-standing significance of those games, and examine the causes of their popularity. As these topics are understudied, the paper needs to be partly descriptive. Together with the space restrictions and the broad range of games and factors discussed, this means that cultural sociological concepts and methods can only be explained and applied in a limited way. Nevertheless, illustrating their usefulness to game studies is an important, if secondary, goal of the present work.

The players' sociodemographic characteristics
This part of the paper aims to distinguish the basic social categories of Poles interested in cRPGs and strategy games at the turn of the 21st century (it will be

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[5] The terms 'reception' and 'reflection' have been applied by Wendy Griswold. The former designates the way people make use of cultural objects. The latter concerns the origins of those objects, treated as manifestations of societal values, class conflicts or interests, social pathologies, and so forth (Griswold, 1986, pp. 9–10).