Jaroslav Švelch, **Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018, 400 pp., $45.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Adrienne Shaw
Temple University

Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games, by Jaroslav Švelch, is an important addition to broader calls for a more critical approach to game history, adding to the growing body of literature that moves beyond a focus on the commercial games industry in the United States, the UK, and Japan. Drawing on oral histories, archival material, preserved games, and other published sources, this book demonstrates that much of what we know about video game history has focused on narrow experiences of what was a diverse global phenomenon. Moreover, the book offers a picture of 1980s' communist Czechoslovakia that pushes back on Western stereotypes of the Soviet Bloc. Much like Benjamin Peters' (2016) *How Not to Network a Nation*, it shows us how parallel histories of the technological developments in capitalist and communist countries during the Cold War allow us to make sense of *why,* not just *that*, technologies and tech cultures within specific countries developed as they did.
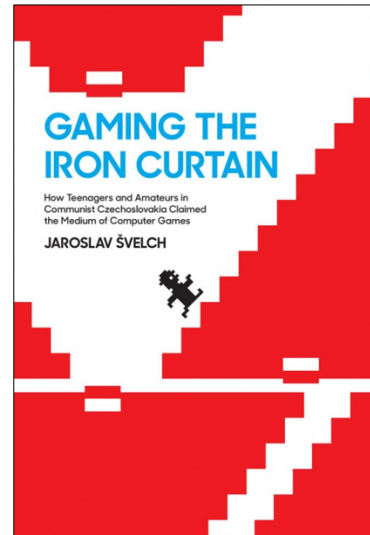
A major strength of the book is that while it is ostensibly about a narrow slice of time, the author grounds that analysis in a longer history of technology policies in the country (starting in the 1960s), the introduction of microcomputers, and the broader context of life in 1980s' Czechoslovakia. It demonstrates that even spaces that are at the margins of mainstream commercial game history can give us a rich understanding of how games move within local and global flows. This history of a country that was not part of the central loci of the production and distribution of commercial games and computer hardware forces readers to think critically about the things that we have simply taken for granted in how game cultures developed. I am surprised it is not cited, because the book it most reminds me of is Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's (2009) *Games of Empire*. It is a strong historical analysis, but it is also an exceptionally good political-economic analysis and should be read alongside that book. Moreover, like Gina Neff's (2012) *Venture Capital*, it offers a nuanced theoretical argument and understanding of the broader sociopolitical structures in which technology works and culture develops through the lens of rich personal stories.

Chapter 1 introduces one of the book's most interesting central arguments, that the betweenness of home computers and games as technological tools and cultural tools is what led them to be largely ignored by the country's communist party. The sidelining of microcomputers within the Czechoslovakian economy and society, in part, made them available for experimentation by hobbyists, which is explored in more depth in chapter 3. Moreover, as chapter 5 details, computers and games were not seen as a potential propaganda tool, nor was the home computer seen as something the party leaders/government needed to concern

themselves with; thus, the distribution of pirated games from the West via more liberal Eastern bloc countries went unregulated. Coupled with language barriers and a lack of the paratexts surrounding these games, Švelch argues that these intersecting factors brought about "a specific kind of unknowledgeable, exploratory play" (p. 147) that produced a unique culture of making and playing games. Further, he points out that this likely occurred in many places throughout the world, but it has yet to be part of our collective understanding of games history. The development of the indie/amateur game scene this led to is covered in chapter 6. These and other factors addressed throughout the book created an open space for the enthusiast maker/player scene that developed its own form of political commentary and self-expression, as addressed in chapter 7.

Building on those strengths, the remaining chapters offer a rich context for understanding amateur game making in Czechoslovakia. Chapter 2 takes the reader through the series of steps one had to go through to get a home computer in the 1980s in Czechoslovakia, as well as exploring why two main groups were the ones to go through this process: electronic enthusiasts and children/young people. Although these might seem like obvious groups to be earlier adopters, given game and technology histories situated elsewhere, Švelch actually walks us through how Czech society, economy, and politics influenced the particular ways in which these groups adopted these technologies. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the lack of an in-country legitimate retail infrastructure is why do-it-yourself computer repairs and add-ons flourished and created a culture of self-reliant and creative programmers that eschewed a consumerist approach to technology. It also explores the reliance of the amateur computer enthusiast on paramilitary and educational institutions, even if that patronage did not always come with ideological oversite. Švelch details the central role of hobbyist clubs and youth groups in creating an infrastructure for distributing and playing games, although, as chapter 4 details, games held a contested place within these communities. He shows, via comparisons to other countries, that discourses around games, such as the division between games and software or whether games should be fun or starting points for tinkering/hacking are not universal. Further, compared to other countries' gaming histories, those making games in Czechoslovakia have "always been indies," he argues in the book's conclusion (p. 221). Treating indie culture as a departure from commercial culture is only true in certain national contexts.

Švelch does a particularly good job of interweaving comparisons to other countries to emphasize what is unique about the history he describes. Doing so helps challenge common sense narratives of technological adoption, and allows the book to offer a rich and nuanced understanding of the cultural and economic significance of the home computer in this context. In this analysis, architecture and home décor norms intersect with a national economy and global labor flows, and it helps show how technologies' cultural significance is shaped by myriad factors. One surprising finding in the book is that although patriarchal values made the "technical intelligentsia" a predominantly masculine domain, women still had a strong presence in data processing and professional computing fields (p. 19). Women made up 58% of the country's professional programmers in 1986, for example, which he contrasts to the U.S. statistic of 35% at its peak (p. 20). As he explains in chapter 3, however, women were structurally excluded from hobbyist spaces. Although not claimed by the author, this book offers further evidence for something feminist historical technological research has long demonstrated: social norms, industry and educational structures, and economic incentives shape the gendered nature of these professions (e.g., Abbate, 2012).

The book is purposely written for those without knowledge of 1980s' era communist history, which allows it to be a nuanced account in addition to being broadly accessible. It is interdisciplinary in terms of the

literature it draws on but is broadly accessible. If there is a weakness in the book, it is that the second half of the introduction gets a little too focused on specific terms from social, historical, and anthropological theories, detracting from the otherwise logical progressions of the book's narrative. Having these explanations incorporated with later examples would, from a teaching standpoint, be preferred. There are also times where the use of particular theoretical terms makes the book's arguments less accessible to those unfamiliar with the specific subfields it draws on. But those are minor quibbles, and I think the author has produced a very theoretically grounded history with many useful insights.

On the whole, *Gaming the Iron Curtain* is written in a style that could work as readily in an undergraduate classroom as it might in a graduate-level seminar. Those teaching courses on digital games, media, or technology history should consider adding it to their syllabi. It would also be an interesting read for any student of Cold War–era life. There is also a website for the book (http://ironcurtain.svelch.com/) with additional multimedia resources, including playable versions of some of the games discussed in the book. This website serves as an easily accessible archive/exhibit of the very history the book documents, which reinforces a key point Švelch ends on. In the conclusion he reflects on what other materials need to be preserved, so that we have a fuller account of global gaming history. In conclusion, a stated goal of the book is to "sketch out a possible blueprint for future national or regional studies" (p. 223), and it does just that.

References

Abbate, J. (2012). *Recoding gender: Women's changing participation in computing.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Peters, B. (2016). *How not to network a nation: The uneasy history of the Soviet Internet*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.