

Preserving Play: Archiving Digital Games in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Interview with Jan KREMER

Jan Kremer

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Jan Kremer is head of Pixelarchiv.cz, a joint project of the Národní filmový archiv, Department of Game Design at FAMU and Institute of Intermedia at the Czech Technical University in Prague. The project aims to design, implement, and verify processes for the preservation of Czechoslovak and Czech digital games and to develop technical solutions reflecting the needs of Czech memory institutions. His research interests are further focused on the method and theory of public history. He is particularly interested in the representations of the past in digital games and the construction and perception of historical authenticity. He is an external lecturer in historical game studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague and a co-founder of the Central and Eastern European Historical Games Collective.

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Adam Kysler is a PhD candidate at the Department of Digital Games at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. His field of interest includes the local history of the digital games industry, game development and level design. He is currently working on a dissertation thesis focused on the systematic research of the history of local digital games.

Adam Kysler (A. K.): Pixelarchiv.cz is a project of the Národní filmový archiv [National Film Archive] in Prague, Czech Republic. What is the main goal of the project?

Jan Kremer: First of all, it has to be mentioned that digital games are one of the most endangered types of cultural heritage on an international scale. According to recent surveys the majority of historical games are not available today, e.g. they might be scattered around different archives or museums, but they are not accessible to players, not even researchers. In many cases we have even lost their code and thus we are not able to create their long-term preservation copy properly. The same can be said about important paratexts, i.e. all media artifacts connected to the game titles like design documents, packaging or marketing materials, but also all types of online content like reviews, fan pages or playthroughs. Paradoxically, we know more about some early 20th century institutions than about recent digital games. The reason for this desperate state of affairs is the lack of institutional games preservation. Existing archives and libraries are only slowly orienting themselves towards interactive media. Without proper state, industry and community support they often face fundamental legal, technological and economic obstacles. Therefore it is essential that Central European societies follow the example of Scandinavian and other Western countries and engage in the preservation of their interactive cultural heritage. The goal of our project is explained in its official title: "Complex care for cultural heritage in the field of gaming applications". We aim to design, implement, and describe processes for the protection of cultural heritage in the form of digital games and to develop corresponding solutions reflecting the needs of Czech memory institutions like archives, museums or galleries.

A. K.: Do your preservation efforts extend to Slovak games post-1993, or are they primarily focused on Czechoslovak and Czech titles?

Jan Kremer: Based on the rules of our funding programme set by the Ministry of Culture we should be primarily concerned with Czech and Czechoslovak digital games since the beginning of their production in the early 1980s. Still, our definition of a 'Czech game' is not always rigorous and there are also many development companies existing in Czechia that we can consider Czechoslovak based on the nationality or the origin of their members.

A. K.: Some film archives (e.g. NFSA in Australia) have expanded their scope to include preservation efforts for digital games. What are the reasons for establishing this project under the Národní filmový archiv?

Jan Kremer: Thanks to its long-time treatment of audio-visual materials, the Národní filmový archiv has both the most suitable facilities and the most experienced personnel for such a task. Still, the goal is to propose tools and methods usable at other memory institutions in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, most of them have avoided or ignored digital games so far. It is important to add that the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) and the Institute of Intermedia at the Czech Technical University are also members of the project team. The former provides the necessary scholarly and the latter the technological know-how.

A. K.: What are the specifics of archiving digital games compared to film, for example?

Jan Kremer: The answer to this question would take one whole section of an average library. In short, it can be said that games as digital interactive and multimedia programs require specific technological and archival approaches. For example, since the game is only created by playing, we must pay close attention to the play itself, the player's reception and the contemporary context in general. Moreover, long-time preservation demands suitable hardware equipment. As the archive is not able to maintain a large collection of historical computers and consoles we depend on emulation methods. This also brings many specific challenges.

A. K.: The first Czechoslovak digital games are now over 40 years old. Why is the discussion about their unified and systematic archiving only starting now?

Jan Kremer: Attempts to create a central and unified game archiving system appeared after the turn of the millennium and were associated with people like Luděk Janda from Brno or Petr Hyřta from Plzeň. Unfortunately, these true visionaries did not find suitable institutional support. In this field we are still way behind progressive countries such as Finland, Denmark, Germany or Great Britain.

A. K.: According to a Video Game History Foundation study, nearly 90 percent of the game industry's historical output is inaccessible. Is this applicable to our local industry as well?

Jan Kremer: That's a tough question because we're still mapping the landscape. However, the loyal fans of some hardware platforms have done a huge amount of work in this regard. This applies for example to the Czechoslovak 8-bit scene, especially initiatives focused on the most popular computers back then – the Sinclair ZX Spectrum and its Didaktik clones. Members of *Česko-Slovenský Speccy Archiv* systematically search for and preserve games on these platforms. In other cases, however, the situation is much worse.

A. K.: There are a lot of community efforts on video game preservation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia nowadays. How do you want to build on these efforts?

Jan Kremer: As I have already mentioned, the initiatives of contemporaries but also the projects of younger game archivists from both countries play a vital role for our project. In the first year, we approached both Slovak and Czech game historians, community projects, media platforms and collectors, whom we invited to participate in the first meeting called *beSÍřka* at the Ponrepo cinema in Prague. We have also published individual presentations on YouTube. We further plan to develop our networking efforts, inform the community about our plans and hopefully we will also establish closer cooperation on specific topics. Moreover, we are working closely with both Czech and Slovak Game Developers Associations. Leading scholars in the field of game history like Jaroslav Švelch are also members of our team.

A. K.: What do you consider to be the main challenges of digital game preservation in our countries?

Jan Kremer: Firstly, we need to build trust in our relationships with the game industry, community projects and the media. Game preservation is a collective effort. In the wise words of game archivist Henry Lowood, all stakeholders bring a different set of capabilities, strengths and methods to the table. A weakness in one of the stakeholders is often countered by a strength in another. Then there are lots of different challenges concerning technology, legal issues and sustainability. We need to find common unified methods to create long-term preservation versions of games; we must strive to change legal norms so that digital games can be treated as cultural heritage like books or movies and not just software; we need to receive long-term financial and political support from the ministry of culture and the government so that our project continues beyond 2027.

A. K.: How important is our digital game history preservation for local game studies?

Jan Kremer: Both past and present digital games are crucial study material not only for local game studies but also for other disciplines in humanities and social sciences. Thanks to the unprecedented popularity and influence of digital games, we can no longer study any society without studying its games.

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