12. Promises of the Periphery: Producing Games in the Communist and Transformation-Era Czechoslovakia

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Abstract
This chapter addresses the notion of the peripheral in computer game production. Peripheral contexts of cultural production and consumption may be portrayed as lagging behind the centre, less formalized, and exhibiting low production values and high degrees of piracy. I want to offer a way of de-centring the study of game production by arguing that periphery can be a thriving environment, both commercially and creatively, producing many overlooked but original, quirky, and idiosyncratic titles. The chapter discusses the promises of the periphery by analysing the output, the discourses, and the business models of 1980s and 1990s Czechoslovak games based on interview material, as well as textual analyses of games and gaming magazines of the era.

Keywords: game industry, periphery, Soviet bloc, Czechoslovakia, bricolage, amateur production

Introduction

The story goes like this: In 1989, Karvina Corporation, named after the Czechoslovak city of Karviná, released a game called *Killswitch*, which, for a short time, captured the attention and imagination of students at American colleges. It was a strangely offbeat experience of the survival horror variety. Playing as one of two characters, the goal was to ascend from the bottom of a coal mine. The player fought 'dead foremen, coal-golems, and demonic inspectors from the Sovatik corporation' and revealed terrible events that transpired in the mine – the mine's foremen, under pressure to increase

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coal production, had started 'to falsify reports of malfunctions and worker malfeasance,' eventually even torturing poor miners. Except for some red, the game was monochrome, and set to slow MIDI versions of Czech folk songs. Yet, the most innovative element of the game was the ending. Once the player finished the game, the program erased itself and could not be retrieved, making it impossible to replay the game with the other character. Despite the demand, Karvina Corporation never produced more than the initial run of 5000 copies, and only a few – if not just one – copies survive. One of those copies has reportedly been sold on eBay for 733,000 USD.

However appealing, the story of *Killswitch* is fictional, and comes from the eponymous 2013 short story by the science fiction writer Catherynne M. Valente. It was, nevertheless, believable, at least to some. Disconnected from its source material, *Killswitch* grew into an international urban legend, fascinating fans and journalists, who debated its presumed existence and dissected its faked YouTube videos (Grammer 2014; *Kotaku Australia* 2016). Why did the story gain such traction? For one, some of the facts within it were superficially credible. There were, indeed, coal mines in the city of Karviná, just as there was pressure on maximizing coal production within state socialist economies. Stories of obsessive collectors paying enormous amounts for obscure games are likewise often true. There is, however, a second, arguably more important, reason for the appeal of the *Killswitch* hoax. The game's presumed origin in the Soviet bloc situates it an undocumented peripheral void where one can project their own fantasies. Western players knew very little about game production in Czechoslovakia, making it an ideal point of origin for an obscure and forgotten title.

The story of *Killswitch* builds on the West's othering of the Soviet bloc as an exotic locale full of strangeness and mystery, very much akin to orientalism. At the same time, stories like this also highlight the *promise* of the periphery. In its usual sense, a periphery is seen as lesser than, and dependent on, a centre. Seen through this lens, however, a periphery is a space of opportunity and possibility – a space for alternative histories and modes of production that may challenge the rules and norms of the centre. *Killswitch* was never real, yet there were games that may seem equally strange. In one, a worker must fulfil repetitive tasks in a labyrinthine factory while being verbally abused by their superior (Zlámal 1988); in another, Indiana Jones fights the police during an anti-regime demonstration (Znovuzrozeny 1989). This chapter will use the example of 1980s and early 1990s Czechoslovakia (and, more generally, the former Soviet bloc) to evaluate the potential of game production on the periphery. It draws on the research I conducted

for the recent monograph *Gaming the Iron Curtain* (Švelch 2018), as well as additional interviews and textual analysis.

Understanding Peripheries

Although much of game production studies focuses on relatively central locations, the interest in the peripheries has been on the rise. In fact, any research looking at gaming as a global phenomenon must address the role of non-central regions. The *Gaming Globally* volume from 2013 contains chapters on India and the Middle East, as well as my own piece on former Czechoslovakia (Huntemann and Aslinger 2013). Another collection, *Gaming Cultures and Place in the Asia-Pacific* offers case studies from Australasia, China, and South Korea, all of which once were (and by some measures arguably still are) peripheral contexts (Hjorth and Chan 2009). There is further work on Poland (Majkowski 2018) or China (Wirman 2015), as well as a number of historical accounts (Swalwell 2012; Wasiak 2014; Nicoll 2019; also see Wolf 2015). None of them has, however, elaborated on the very concept of *periphery*. In order to do that, I borrow primarily from film production studies, with the starting point being the edited collection *Cinema at the Periphery* (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010a).

Although the word periphery is primarily tied to location, it can denote many more things than just a place that is removed from a centre. As Dina Iordanova and her colleagues put it, 'the concept of periphery is not fixed and static but dynamically adjusts to a range of shifting patterns of dominance in spheres such as industry, ideology, and taste' (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010b, 8; see also Szczepanik, Zahrádka, and Macek 2020). Peripherality is relational, meaning that – to use a game history example – the UK could be peripheral in relation to the US, but central in relation to Czechoslovakia. It is also domain-specific, meaning that, for example, Germany could be a centre of the auto industry, but a periphery of digital game production. Iordanova et al. view the peripheral 'as a mode of practice, as a textual strategy, as a production infrastructure, and as a narrative encoded on the margins of the dominant modes of production, distribution, and consumption' (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010b, 9). This chapter pivots around two aspects of the periphery inspired by this list: first, production infrastructures, and the associated economic and regulatory contexts; second, textual strategies and aesthetics employed in peripheral works.

In terms of infrastructure, I draw inspiration from recent research on informal media industries by authors like Ramon Lobato and Brian

Larkin, who work with peripheral case studies, particularly the Nollywood film productions in Nigeria. Their research shows that peripheries do not just simply adopt and accept the content that is coming from the centre. Peripheral actors build their own makeshift and informal distribution networks, creating their own 'infrastructural order that preys on the official distribution of globalized media' (Larkin 2008, 220). Peripheries challenge the Western-centred thinking about media production. They can be places where piracy is the default way of accessing popular culture, and where low-budget or homebrew productions are the default way of producing it. As Lobato has put it, these are settings where 'informality is a norm, not an aberration' (Lobato 2012, 40).

In terms of textual strategies, postcolonial theory presents an important reference point (Gandhi 2014). According to postcolonial scholarship, the colonial project entailed not only economic and political, but also cultural subjugation and exploitation. The empire made the colonies (peripheries) and colonial subjects into props in its own stories and usurped the power to interpret native cultures. To the colonies, on the other hand, the centre was the source of prestigious culture. In today's technology and media industries, the centres, like Silicon Valley, remain sources of symbolic power for peripheral practitioners, as shown in the ethnographic work by Yuri Takhteyev. In his view, 'local participants orient themselves toward such meccas in an attempt to draw on their symbolic power and to bring the local practice closer to the remote standards' (Takhteyev 2012, 208). But the colonies and peripheries can also 'play back.' Souvik Mukherjee (2017) follows the history of the game of cricket to show how the British-originating sport was adopted by Indians and reframed as a means of getting back at the Brits. Ulf Hannerz has similarly pointed out that receiving culture from the centre does not necessarily mean 'losing' local culture. In his view, the peripheral perspective creates new, *creole* forms, which are shaped by local context (Hannerz 1989), and may result from the textual practice of *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1966). These forms may include Bollywood or Nollywood films, as well as Central and Eastern European point'n'click adventures of the 1990s.

In the third part of the chapter, I discuss the evolving relationships between the periphery and the central cultures and markets. When establishing connections, peripheral producers are clearly at a disadvantage compared to established and economically more powerful central players. While the periphery is indeed often exploited, it also affords unique opportunities. In their influential study of media and multiculturalism, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam observe that the 'received geographies of "core"

and "periphery" are being disrupted and relocated southward and eastward' (Shohat and Stam 2014, 396), pointing out that both Bollywood and Nollywood produce more feature films than Hollywood. In entrepreneurship and regional development research, the benefits of the periphery have been noted by Alistair R. Anderson. Investigating the rural economies of Scottish highlands, he traces the 'commodification of non-material and aesthetic values' of the periphery. In his view, 'those very conditions that characterized the poverty and isolation of the periphery are turned on their head, [and] the "otherness" of the periphery has become a potential advantage' (Anderson 2000, 91, 101). Translated to media production, peripherality can preserve obscure or obsolete practices that may yet become useful or lucrative in the future, or generate new forms and practices derived from the local context.

Peripheral Infrastructures

One of the prominent features of peripheral production is what Iordanova et al. have called 'infrastructural dearth' – the lack of access to resources and distribution channels (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010b, 2). In the 1980s, when video and computer game industries were booming (and busting) in the West, there was next to no hardware or software market in Czechoslovakia despite the growing popular demand. In 1989, there was just one specialized home computer retail store in the country, and even that one was severely understocked. Official imports were limited by import embargos, lack of funds in Western currencies, and the general rigidity of the state-run economy. At times, foreign exporters used the country as a final destination for discounted stock of machines that would not sell in the 'centre' – including obscure platforms such as the Sharp MZ-800. Nevertheless, most users bought their micros abroad or on the black market. The British Sinclair ZX Spectrum, originally released in 1982, became the country's number one microcomputer platform thanks to its low price and versatility. Its position was solidified by the release of a domestic clone, Didaktik Gama, in 1987. By 1988, estimated 100,000 users owned a Spectrum-compatible computer.

The infrastructural dearth also explains the absence of Western and Japanese video game consoles in the country. The console business model at the time required a stable infrastructure of import and distribution of cartridges, which was non-existent in the Soviet bloc. Microcomputers, on the other hand, cost more but could be easily used with pirated software.

With a few exceptions, no original copies of games were sold in Czechoslovakia. There were no commercial publishers because private enterprise was effectively illegal, and state institutions did not publish software either. As the public intellectual and computing enthusiast Bohuslav Blažek wrote of home computing, 'what powered the most massive commercial boom in America's history, was [in Czechoslovakia] a mere source of minor odd jobs' (Blažek 1990, 15). In such a setting, it was unlikely there would be a Karvina Corporation; at least, it would not be a corporation in the usual sense of the word.

Infrastructural dearth was accompanied by a lack of regulation, also typical of peripheral contexts. Czechoslovak authorities tightly controlled public and economic life, and meticulously censored traditional media, from literature to popular music. They even levied exorbitant customs fees on individually imported computers. They did not, however, find computer games worth censoring, taxing, or protecting by copyright. There are several possible explanations. Games were a relatively niche pastime, easily overlooked by the aging bureaucrats in charge of the country. Neither did the people in power realize that computer games were a medium capable of delivering subversive messages.

In place of the missing infrastructures, local computer fans formed their own on the foundation of existing, state-sponsored frameworks. As it was illegal to publicly convene without official backing, home computer users established an extensive network of amateur computer clubs within the existing infrastructure of paramilitary and youth organizations. To the state, the clubs posed as benign spaces where students prepared for their future jobs in the socialist military or economy, giving the authorities little reason to closely monitor them (Yurchak 2006). In reality, these clubs became busy places where the youth played Western games, made their own, and traded software and know-how. Moreover, the clubs became important hubs of an efficient informal distribution network, which soon encompassed the whole country. Users freely swapped and copied both foreign and domestic software, sometimes in person, other times by mail. Such repurposing of existing infrastructures is common in peripheral, not yet formalized media productions. In 1980s Poland, for example, computer hardware and software were often sold at large outdoor markets (Wasiak 2014). The distribution of Nollywood film production also relies on a loose network of street vendors (Larkin 2008). A differentiating feature of 1980s Czechoslovakia as compared to other peripheries was the relatively limited role of for-profit piracy, as there was little business for pirates when most software was shared through non-profit computer clubs.

Before 1989, virtually no money could be earned by making games. Most of the authors were high school or college students with plenty of free time and good connections within the community. They wrote games to impress their peers, tell their own stories, and sometimes – as I show later – to voice their opinions. Compared to US and Japanese industrial productions, and even the British 'bedroom' programmers, the local scene was strictly do-it-yourself. As one of the country's most influential coders, František Fuka, put it in 1988: 'The few individuals that make games in our country can naturally hardly compete with teams of specialists, for whom making games is not only fun, but also a job (a paid one, of course)' (Fuka 1988, 11–12). In the 1980s, their peers in foreign commercial studios tended to utilize 16-bit machines and specialized development tools to write 8-bit games. Czechoslovak hobbyists, however, mostly worked on a single, sometimes even shared computer. As a result, local games tended to be less ambitious than the Western ones. Around half of the local 1980s Spectrum games were text adventures, which were relatively easy to code, and did not require graphics. Neither of these limitations, however, prevented local amateurs from producing at least three hundred titles that have survived to this day – suggesting that communal homebrew production is a viable way of making games.

Peripheral Textual Strategies

Czechoslovak 8-bit games did not follow a single style or aesthetic. Instead, various peripheral forms developed in response to the games that arrived from abroad. Due to the dominance of the Sinclair ZX Spectrum, Czechoslovak hobbyists played plenty of games from the countries that produced Spectrum software, especially the UK and Spain. British and Spanish games were, in turn, often inspired by the trends in American and Japanese game industries. Czechoslovakia's connections to the contemporary game industry centres were therefore facilitated by a string of intermediaries. Conversely, US and UK developers had little knowledge of how their games are being used in the Soviet bloc, and did not intentionally 'colonize' its markets. The process was much more complex and two-sided.

Due to its amateur (or, to use a more contemporary term, homebrew) nature, most domestic production was based on the practice of bricolage. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's original account, the bricoleur is introduced alongside the engineer as two contrasting, though often overlapping, types of creative practice. While the engineer proceeds from a conceptual blueprint to

procure required materials, the bricoleur 'addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours' and has to 'make do with "whatever is at hand"' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 19, 17). While Lévi-Strauss respects bricolage, he clearly situates it on the periphery – as an approach typical of old-fashioned tinkerers and handymen as well as pre-modern tribal peoples occupying the margins of the Western world. After all, bricolage is a practice well suited to contexts with limited resources.

Czechoslovak homebrewers, too, composed their works using scraps of code, mechanics, and audiovisuals from Western titles. Western games circulated in pirated copies that lacked original paratextual information, and only a few copies of Western magazines made it into the country. Czechoslovak homebrewers therefore had access to the game software but very limited knowledge of the production processes behind them (see Šisler, Švelch, and Šlerka 2017). To use a parallel from linguistics, they knew the texts but did not know the grammar. Local bricoleurs were aware of their peripheral position but did not know – or did not have to respect – the conventions or legal constraints that applied in the centre. To them, the meanings and uses of games as a medium were remarkably flexible.

Many of the locally produced titles were ports, conversions, or clones of foreign titles (Švelch 2018). As peripheries are often home to obsolete or obscure platforms, remaking hit games for those platforms was an essential component of homebrew efforts. Throughout the 1980s, local homebrewers also engaged in plenty of mimicry. Western-sounding labels like Demon Ltd. or Ninja Soft did not refer to actual companies, but to local high-schoolers mimicking the labels they saw in Western games. One of the teenagers, Tomáš Rylek, assumed the label T.R.C. to mimic the famous British studio Ultimate Play the Game, also known as A.C.G. Using programming tricks learned by dissecting Western titles, he wrote *Star Fly* and *Star Swallow,* a couple of shoot 'em-up games, which could be – at first sight – mistaken for professional Western productions (Rylek 1987a; 1987b). On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the mechanics are much less fine-tuned and that the English language throughout is non-native (a high score table, for example, exclaims: 'Hurrah to the carcasses!') But Rylek's work was not just an adoration of Western idols by a peripheral creator. By mastering the genre, himself and the community also expanded their creative repertoire and gained much-needed confidence.

Local games contained familiar (from the Western point of view) characters, scenarios, or game mechanics in unfamiliar combinations. Indiana

Jones, for example, became a popular character in Czechoslovak amateur games. First appearing in the 1985 text adventure *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Fuka 1985), he appeared in at least six more popular text adventures during the decade. Unrestrained by popular culture canon or copyright, he was even allowed to use the weapons of Ghostbusters (in Fuka's aforementioned title), or to beat up Communist police on a Prague square in one of the most remarkable Czechoslovak activist games (Znovuzrozeny 1989). John Rambo made at least two appearances, once as the main villain fighting a Soviet hero in the satirical text adventure *Shatokhin* (Hrda, Hlaváč, and Sybilasoft 1988), and once in the game *Jack Frost '88* by Karel Papík (1988).

The latter game's title collage exemplifies the aesthetic of peripheral bricolage. It contains pieces of 'cool' Western content, which Papík cut and pasted from British games – Rambo's portrait, the two throwaway ninjas, and the ominous subtitle 'Do or Die.' In fact, neither Rambo, nor the ninjas explicitly appear in the game, although the title image does invite the player to identify with a Rambo-like hero. At the same time, some of the images ground the game firmly in the final years of the Cold War. The map of the Soviet Union is covered with barbed wire and laid over with a crosshair, promising a confrontation between the West and the East, and the title refers to the Soviet fairy tale film, called *Jack Frost* in the English release, but well known as *Mrazík* in Czechoslovakia (Papík 2019). The goal of this illustrated text adventure is to infiltrate a Soviet army base and steal important documents. Playing on the reference to Jack Frost, it is also a fairy tale of sorts, but an anti-Soviet rather than a Soviet one. At the time of the game's release, mockery of Soviet icons was quite common among many young people, who found the Communist ideology oppressive and outdated, and whose cultural allegiance was with the West.

While adopting influences from the centre, a periphery can also give birth to idiosyncratic genres and design approaches. Members of the domestic developer community often cited each other or made unofficial sequels to others' games, creating a series of indigenous trends. After all, local text adventures (also called *textovky*, singular *textovka*) emerged as a specific ('creole') subgenre – shorter, less complex, more comedic, and more personal than the English-language ones. Another local specialty was the hacking game genre, in which the player cracked puzzles to connect to simulated computer networks. The initial inspiration came from the British game *System 15000* (Kristofferson 1984) – but while hacking games remained obscure in the West, more than 25 of them were released in Czechoslovakia, many of them in *The Sting* series started by František Fuka. Similar local circuits of influence, along with inspiration from local culture, have led to

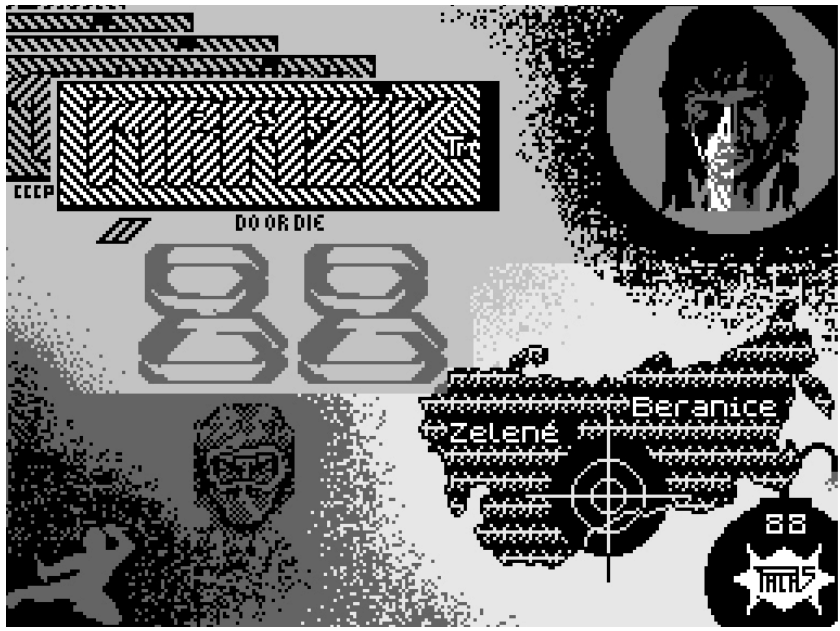

Figure 12.1: Loading screen of *Jack Frost '88* (Papík 1988). Artwork used with permission of the author and copyright owner Karel Papík.

the emergence of regional or national design styles, like the so-called 'British surrealism' or 'French touch', both of which are defined in opposition to American or Japanese production (Donovan 2010).

Connecting the Periphery

The relationship between Czechoslovakia (and its successor countries) and the centres of game industry evolved over the years, revealing several roles that a peripheral game production can play in relation to a centre. During the Soviet era, the connections to the West (and Japan) were mostly one-way. Czechoslovak amateurs drew inspiration from pirated foreign games but domestic production generally did not make it out of the country. Borrowing from Henry Jenkins (1992) and Michel de Certeau (1984), it could be said that the periphery was *poaching* from the centre.

After November 1989's Velvet Revolution, the Iron Curtain fell, the Communist regime was dismantled, and private enterprise reintroduced. Czechoslovakia (and later, since 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) became much more connected to the outside world but remained on a periphery. Although the citizens were now free to travel and import

technology, they nonetheless remained poorer than Westerners. Due to high prices of imported games, informal distribution continued to play a major role throughout the 1990s. While the centres have already transitioned to 16-bit gaming hardware, many Eastern European players stuck with their 8-bit machines. This peripheral position, however, created opportunities for local producers. One of the country's first commercial game publishers was Proxima, based in the Northern Czech city of Ústí nad Labem, itself a periphery. Its co-founder Petr Podařil initially attempted to distribute software for IBM PCs, but soon realized the opportunities of the ZX Spectrum market, by then largely abandoned by Western publishers. Proxima bought distribution rights for some of the 1980s local hits, recruited talent among alumni of 1980s computer clubs, and published over two dozen titles, sold mostly through mail order. Interestingly, local 8-bit software publishing houses, including Proxima, initially piggybacked on the manufacturing infrastructure of the already established music industry, taking advantage of the latter's tape duplication facilities (Podařil 2015; Hrda 2016).

While most of the commercially published games were original works, it took some time before the social norms and copyright legislation adapted to the Western standards. The Proxima-published *Atomix* (Rak and Matoušek 1990), for example, was an unlicenced and slightly modified conversion of the recent Amiga puzzle title with the same name (Softtouch 1990). As Podařil comments, 'no one had the slightest idea' about the line between legal inspiration and copyright infringement (2015). To use another example, a game like *Somari* (Somari Team 1994) – a mash-up of Sonic the Hedgehog and Mario – seems to be desirable but unthinkable in the West or in Japan, but was actually produced somewhere in the Asian periphery and became successful in the Soviet Union. As Lobato and Julian Thomas point out, the 'distinctions between legal and illegal conduct, between productive trade and non-productive piracy, and between formal and informal economies are inevitably leaky' (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 62). Although this was not the case of Proxima, a number of Eastern European video game publishers started out with piracy in the 1980s, built an audience for their products, and gradually legalized their businesses during the transformation era (Ozimek 2018).

While the periphery might have run on obsolete hardware, it would be wrong to assume that it was simply delayed. Rather, it had its own *parallel markets* focusing on other platforms or other genres (see Švelch 2017). Proxima's programmers closely followed the developments on more advanced platforms, bringing new genres to old computers. In 1991, the company published *The Name of the Rose* (George K. 1991), a point-and-click adventure for the Spectrum inspired by *The Secret of Monkey*

Figure 12.2. Title screen of *The Name of the Rose*, advertising that Peter Sellers stars as Jacques Clouseau. The newspaper clipping shows an ambulance driving a hospitalized Umberto Eco. Artwork used with permission of the author and copyright owner Jiří Koudelka.

Island (Lucasfilm 1990). Rather than an adaptation of the Umberto Eco novel, it was a free-wheeling pastiche of content that was popular at the time or dear to its author, Jiří Koudelka. The game takes place at a female convent in the present day, and the main character is inspector Clouseau from the Pink Panther films. Unsurprisingly, it also includes references to Indiana Jones (namely, his whip) and other icons of Czechoslovak ZX Spectrum gaming. Reflecting the flamboyant atmosphere of the 1990s transition to capitalism, the game also features crude sex jokes, several sex scenes (although told mostly through text descriptions), and a cameo by the then-famous German erotic TV game show *Tutti Frutti*. The game was marketed as an adult-only title, which made it especially attractive to teenagers. With around 1,300 copies sold, it was already considered a commercial success (Jiří Koudelka, personal communication). An even more ambitious (but quite somber) 8-bit point'n'click adventure *Twilight: Land of Shadows* (Dekan, Javor, and Grellneth 1995) was released as late as 1995 by the Slovak publisher Ultrasoft, and became the company's last published title. Peripheries thus continue to serve older platforms after they become obsolete in the centre.

Point'n'click adventures were just as popular on more advanced platforms like the IBM PC or Commodore Amiga. Taking advantage of the language barrier and lack of official localization, local developers developed titles written and dubbed in the local language, addressing local themes and using local cultural references. At a time when original copies of foreign games were still unaffordable, Czechoslovak adventures such as the fairy-tale-themed *Dragon History* (NoSense 1995) were cheap, homely, and humorous, offering a welcome and affordable alternative to Western production.

More recently, the periphery has served as a supplier of *niche games*. Thanks to the parallel markets, several genres survived on the peripheries after they fell out of favour in major markets. This way, 2D point'n'click adventures continued to be made in Germany thanks to companies like Daedalic Entertainment, and Western-style computer role-playing games were kept alive thanks to European companies like CD Projekt Red (based in Poland) or Piranha Bytes (based in Germany). Some of their titles have been called *Eurojank*, a term referring to the lack of polish of certain low-to-mid-budget European titles (Finlay 2019). At the same time, they appealed to the international audiences because of their novelty and distinctiveness. Local aesthetic and thematic influences help peripheral productions stand out in global competition, as in the cases of Czech studios such as Amanita Design, who married point'n'click adventure games with the tradition of Czech animation, or Warhorse Studios, who set their recent role-playing game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) in medieval Czech lands.

The flipside of peripheral production is *outsourcing*, which positions peripheral developers as a source of cheap labour (Kerr 2017). While often seen as a relatively contemporary trend, in can be traced back to the 1980s Soviet bloc. Already in 1985, the American publisher Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI) sold games produced by another US firm Logical Design Works, headed by the California-based Polish immigrant Lucjan Wencel. His company, in turn, outsourced its operations to the Polish studio called P. Z. Karen Co. Development Group (Mańkowski 2020). The Polish team later started developing original games for the Western markets under the label *California Dreams* and produced titles such as the hot rod racing game *Street Rod* (P. Z. Karen Co. 1989), which took place in 1950s United States. Despite these admirable successes, P. Z. Karen was a de facto subsidiary of its American mother company, which did not outlast the shifting economic fortunes of the 1990s (Ozimek 2018).

Table 12.1: Features of peripheral productions

Infrastructures	Infrastructural dearth
	Lack of regulation
	Informality
	Amateur/homebrew networks
Textual strategies	Bricolage
	Mimicry
	Creole forms
	Niche platforms/genres
Connections to centre	Poaching
	Parallel markets
	Supplying niche products
	Outsourcing work

Conclusion

The Czechoslovak (and, more generally, post-Soviet) story has revealed a wide range of features of peripheral game productions, as summed up in Table 12.1. The infrastructural aspects like scarcity, informality, and lack of regulation gave rise to a set of peripheral textual strategies such as bricolage, mimicry, or creole forms. The infrastructures and textual strategies, together with the inequality between the periphery and its centre(s), encouraged certain kinds of relationships, including poaching, parallel markets, niche productions, or outsourcing. The table should be, however, understood as an inspiration for further research rather than an exhaustive list, as it derives from empirical material from a very specific region and a very specific historical period.

Some of the peripheral features present creative and economic opportunities. As Aphra Kerr has pointed out in her work on the global game industry, 'alternative ideas, genres, content and groups can emerge in unlikely places' (Kerr 2017, 153). At the same time, peripheral production also has its risks and deficiencies. A large part of global game production (as well as hardware production) is outsourced into countries whose lack of labor regulation results in poor working conditions or unfair pay, as demonstrated by Anna Ozimek using the example of Polish testers (2019; see also Vanderhoef and Curtin 2016). At the same time, some regions – such as the former Soviet bloc – are at a risk of being portrayed as a haven for companies that produce titles like *Active Shooter* (Acid Software 2018) or *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), which offer troubling content (and questionable quality) in the name

of free speech. Such production is more socially permissible in countries like Russia or Poland, respectively, due to the fact that critical discussions about game representation have not fully permeated their industries (see Majkowski 2018). Fortunately, such products are still vastly outnumbered by original and imaginative games like *Machinarium* (Amanita Design 2009) or *Superhot* (Superhot Team 2016).

To return to our initial example, how do the features of peripheral production match up with the fictional example of *Killswitch*? Could a game like *Killswitch* be produced in Czechoslovakia in 1989? Many aspects of *Killswitch* did, in fact, appear in 1980s Czechoslovak game production. One could find activist titles that were critical of the Communist regime or made fun of everyday life in the socialist economy; local homebrewers likewise did come up with several left-field ideas and technical solutions – although a self-erasing computer game was not technically possible even in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, *Killswitch* seems too elaborate and polished to be a Czechoslovak game from 1989, where most games were made by amateurs. There could be no Karvina Corporation – and even if there was, all foreign trade was tightly controlled, and a game that criticizes the socialist mining industry was unlikely to be cleared for international distribution. There were some satirical games taking place in factories – like *TOL* (Zlámal 1988) or *Karma* (Misterka and Hertl 1988) – but these were fairly simple, amateur games that were never commercially released. From the point of view of Western cultural industries, the behaviour of local amateurs – who gave games away for free – would have been economically irrational. This irrationality is one of the main themes of the *Killswitch* story, whose drama arises from the fact that Karvina Corporation ignored the demand for their games and only released them in limited runs.

So, while the *Killswitch* story is inspiring in making one think about alternative histories and alternative sources of gaming, it has one fundamental shortcoming. Understandably as a piece of fiction written by an American author in a collection of short stories about Japan, the value it ascribes to the game derives from its reception by American college students or Japanese collectors – as if the centre (and the price in US dollars) was the only arbiter of the cultural value of strange artifacts coming from the periphery. But if the centre really wants to understand and appreciate the periphery, it should not insist on being able to purchase, play, and enjoy its products. The takeaway for game scholars is that the periphery should be studied on its own terms, regardless of whether its products make it 'big' in central markets and cultures.

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