
'Czechoslovakia 38-89' computer game changes the teaching of modern history

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The new 'Czechoslovakia 38-89' educational game allows students to experience key moments of Czech and Czechoslovakian modern history from the point of view of a variety of characters. Similarly to the American 'Revolution' and Danish 'Global Conflicts' games, ' [Czechoslovakia 38-89](#) ' will be used in teaching, helping students to better understand the complex political, social and cultural context of historical events. A test version of the game will be tried out by selected universities between October and December 2013. The project was presented to iForum by Mgr. Vít Šisler, Ph.D., from the Institute of Information Studies and Librarianship of the CU Faculty of Arts.



The game deals with the period from 1938 to 1989. What led you to choose this particular period of Czech history?

Students born after 1989 generally have a low awareness of key moments in modern Czech history, chiefly in relation to the periods of totalitarianism from 1938-1945 and 1948-1989. Primarily in the period from 1948-89, there are a lot of gaps not sufficiently covered by teaching materials for primary and secondary schools. Last but not least, this is also a period for which there are, thanks to the activities of researchers and a large number of non-profit organisations, sufficient authentic testimonies from people who were there, and on which we can base teaching simulations.

Does this help players identify with historical figures in individual periods?

Simulations involve players having conversations with witnesses to historical events. Individual conversations are framed by a meta-story in which players have a clearly defined goal, e.g. in the module about Heydrich they have to discover the fate of their grandfather. At certain moments, the memories of the eyewitness blend with an interactive comic that the player can control themselves. The game thus combines the form of a comic with video and period materials such as radio and television programmes, period publications and documents, daily newspapers and everyday items.

The aim of every individual game is to piece together a story in its entirety on the basis of various available fragments, testimonies and period materials. Players reach various levels and details of the story depending on the questions they ask and materials they get.



The first version was tested at the recent 'Festival fantazie' pop-culture event. Which elements of the game were the most successful?

The first version of the simulation was played by about three hundred people at the festival. Most positive feedback focused on the graphic design, story and inclusion of authentic, period materials. The game was generally very successful, although we received a lot of valuable feedback from players about how to improve it.

From the start you have been working in cooperation with your future target group – university students. Did students want to make the game more like the majority of computer games, the kind they play every day?

We learned from the evaluation of our previous education project, ' [Europe 2045](#) ', that students do not perceive educational simulations in the same way they do normal computer games, and have different expectations of them. They are more conservative in their approach to teaching and expect the chief benefit to be education, and not entertainment. Their comments were, therefore, quite constructive and concerned the majority of the content of the simulation, or suggestions for improving user interfaces.

The combination of computer game, comic and history must place high demands on team make-up. How many people contribute to the creation of the game?

While the core of the team (historians, scriptwriters, programmers and graphic designers) consists of about fifteen people, a large number of external consultants, for example animators, testers and specialists looking for period film material, also cooperate on the project.

How have historians been helping?

The choice of characters created for the simulations of the period in question is a key element, and we endeavour to always include 'typical' roles, of both individuals and groups, whose memories are often marginalised in most of the discourse. The game features representatives of national minorities, and students can see events of the time from their point of view. The basic principle of the simulation is to provide students with a variety of subjective views of different participants, which then form the subject of class debate, critical appraisal and are placed in their wider context.

Historians from the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and from the Faculty of Arts of Charles University are therefore key members of our team. When creating a methodology for teachers, we further closely cooperate with historians from the Education Group of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.



During September you will test a demo version of the game at secondary schools. When do you expect the development process to be completed?

The demo version will be tested in twelve secondary schools in the Czech Republic between October and December 2013. Based on feedback from students and teachers, we will work on improving both the game itself and the teaching methodology. During 2014 the game will be subject to an intensive testing process, with complex evaluations, which will be open to secondary schools. The simulation shall be released to the general public in January 2015.

The game is being created through cooperation between the Faculties of Arts and of mathematics and Physics. Do the two faculties cooperate on other projects, too?

We are engaged in long-term cooperation with the Faculty of mathematics and Physics, and specifically with the Department of Software and Computer Science Education, as part of the New Media Studies project at the CU Faculty of Arts. In cooperation with our colleagues at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, we contributed to the creation of the aforementioned 'Europe 2045' educational simulation, whose development was sponsored by the Generation Europe non-profit organisation. Every year we further organise several events attended by students of both faculties, and cooperate through inter-faculty teams, such as The Development of Computer Games, Artificial Beings, Educational Simulations and Video Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon.