

Teaching Contemporary History with *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination*

Vit Sisler, Charles University in Prague
Jakub Gemrot, Charles University in Prague
Jaroslav Cuhra, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic
Tereza Selmbacherova, Charles University in Prague
Cyril Brom, Charles University in Prague

Short Game Description: *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination* is a serious game on contemporary history. It features strong narrative, interactive comics and authentic audiovisual materials. It presents key historical events from different perspectives, including previously marginalized groups. The game develops abilities to comprehend and analyze sources of facts and create critical judgments.

Introduction

Recent meta-analyses on the instructional effectiveness of digital game-based learning (DGBL) demonstrated educational games' and simulations' modest superiority over a "traditional" type of instruction (e.g. Wouters et al, 2013). Similarly, empirical studies on the use of games and simulations for curricular history education reported promising results (e.g. Kennedy-Clark & Thompson, 2011). As far as we know, there is no educational simulation available dealing with the contested issues from Czech, and more generally Eastern European, contemporary history.

Game Description

Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination is a complex single-player dialog-based adventure game with a strong narrative, including interactive comics and authentic audiovisual materials. It presents key events from Czechoslovakia's contemporary history and enables players to "experience" these events from different perspectives.

Educational Objectives

The game aims to develop deeper understanding of the multifaceted political, social and cultural aspects of this time period. Its content stems from historical research and personal testimonies. Emphasis is given on the diversified historical experiences of the population, including previously marginalized groups. At the same time, the game aims to develop abilities to comprehend, compare and analyze sources of facts and create critical judgments.

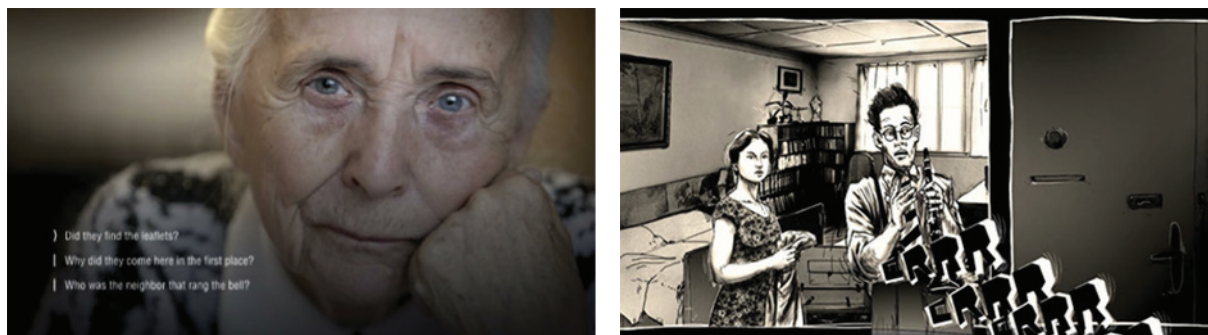


Figure 1: Dialogue scene (left) and comics (right) in *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination*.

Story

The story of *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination* covers the period following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, "Reichsprotektor" of the Nazi-occupied Czech Territories and leading architect of the Holocaust. Players are presented with different responses to the assassination of Heydrich, which in reality triggered a wave of brutal retributions, including the annihilation of the Czech village Lidice. Amid the repression, our protagonist struggles to understand: why his grandfather, J. Jelinek, was arrested after the attack? What role did he play in the attack? Why did he not tell his family? Was he brave or reckless to endanger their lives by becoming a "resistance fighter"?

Game Mechanics

Players in the game interact with the “eyewitnesses” in the present and “travel” back in time through these “eyewitnesses” memories evoked during conversations (see Figure 1). Player cannot change the history in the game yet discover different layers of it through individual testimonies and historical materials. The individual testimonies are often times contradictory, incomplete, or the eyewitnesses simply do not want to talk about certain aspects of their past with the players. As a result, players have to critically evaluate the gained information, exert social skills and empathy, and analytically approach the social constructions of history.

Evaluation

We have evaluated *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination* in 24 Czech high school classes with students aged 15-19 in autumn 2013 and 2014. Seventeen teachers (8 males, 9 females) overall took part in the evaluation. For this study’s purpose, we designed model lessons consisting of selected sequences of the simulation, students’ worksheets and other teaching materials. During and after each lesson, we investigated teachers’ and students’ interest in the topic and their comparative assessment of model vs. “standard” lessons through questionnaires and non-participative observation. Each teacher also filled out a detailed final report after the evaluation. The goal of the evaluation was to test the acceptance of the game by teachers and students as a learning tool in a formal schooling environment.

The evaluation’s key results show that the students perceive the game to be attractive, authentic and immersive. They self-report it enables them to develop a better imagination and deeper understanding of the time period. More specifically, the students mentioned, that thanks to this game they are able to understand several different points of view on one historical event. From the perspective of the Czech teachers, the game is an effective, innovative learning tool that motivates students to learn about Czech contemporary history. Teachers self-report that the game stimulates students’ interest and curiosity and that it provides multi-faceted perspectives on historical events (see Sisler et al, 2014).

We are currently running a large-scale experiment testing the real learning effect of the game. The experiment also investigates the suitability of several design elements (e.g. degree of interactivity) for the educational objectives mentioned above.

Development

We have employed a top-down design process, during which designers refined incrementally the game scenarios together with historians, educationalists, teachers and artists. We have separated game content data from the engine, exploiting benefits of the data-driven software architecture. The home-built engine enables modifications and expansions of the game, as well as development of new projects.

References

- Wouters, P., van Nimwegen, Ch., van Oostendorp, H. & van der Spek, E.D. (2013). A Meta-analysis of the Cognitive and Motivational Effects of Serious Games. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(2), 249-265.
- Sisler, V., Selmbacherova, T., Pinkas, J., Brom, C. (2014). Teaching Contemporary History to High School Students: the Augmented Learning Environment of *Czechoslovakia 38-89*. *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, 8(1), 99-122.
- Kennedy-Clark, S., Thompson, K. (2011). What Do Students Learn When Collaboratively Using A Computer Game in the Study of Historical Disease Epidemics, and Why? *Games and Culture*, 6(6), 513-537.

Acknowledgments

Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination has been developed at the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of the Charles University in Prague and the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. The development of the game was financed by the Czech Ministry of Culture. The research of learning effects was supported by the Inner Grant FF_VG_2015_157 of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. More info: <http://cs3889.com>.