

Zwischen Sozialdisziplinierung und Vergnügen: Politik und Praktiken des Spielens im Staatssozialismus / Between Social Discipline and Pleasure: The Politics and Practices of Play and Games in State Socialism

**Zwischen Sozialdisziplinierung und Vergnügen: Politik und Praktiken des Spielens im Staatssozialismus / Between Social Discipline and Pleasure: The Politics and Practices of Play and Games in State Socialism**

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In Western Cold War self-hagiography, the Eastern Bloc, in contrast to the dynamic capitalist west, was nothing more than a static dictatorship, a Tabula Rasa whose history only began anew with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In other words, the Eastern Bloc was considered a space where creativity was vehemently discouraged. However, as the panelists of this conference showed, the Eastern Bloc was not a space devoid of creativity, but rather an intricate interplay of state, individual, and community intentions that lead to a very particular breed of inventiveness and play. The panelists offered foray into a diverse set of former socialist games, simultaneously unique to their own time and place, and deeply interwoven into the fabric of international politics.

MAREN RÖGER (Augsburg) kicked off the first panel with a discussion of Eastern Bloc board games as „cardboard possibilities,“ spaces for imagining or miming the otherwise impossible. In her estimation, travel board games were designed to create a sense of homeland and socialist comradeship. These games showcased space travel, new technologies, and the future of socialism amongst the stars. The board games of the Eastern Bloc reflected the changing notions of what was possible under state socialism, expanding and contracting the boundaries of play. NIKITA LOMAKIN (Moskau) argued that, in the Soviet Union, board games could be a place to discuss politics in an uncensored manner, to criticize the state, and to build community

solidarity. Some games, such as the homebrew Soviet game „Orwelliana,“ were humorous takes on the rules of the Soviet Union. However, their criticism of the state did not always translate into pro-Western sentiment. These games, according to Lomakin, forged intricate links between members of small underground communities. They brought the real concerns of their members to the table and created the proper atmospheres to discuss them. In discussing the self-made board games of the GDR, MARTIN THIELE-SCHWEZ (Berlin) unraveled the role of both the state and individual in GDR game production. State-produced games were often made up of very simple pieces, so as not to distract production capabilities from more „serious“ endeavors. Thus, many games played in the GDR were self-made copies, produced under the duress of scarcity. Copying a game was an act to which the people concerned attached great importance and often reflected the real everyday lives of their creators. CHRISTIN LUMME (Nürnberg), in her commentary, discussed how, for a long time, games were not considered an important cultural resource. Her own work in acquiring and preserving games at the German Games Archive Nuremberg seeks to undo this oversight. In the discussion with the panelists, it was noted that there was a notion of risk to these games being played, not only with the rules themselves, but also with the very act of playing them.

Drawing mostly from both the Soviet and Czechoslovak versions of the official pedagogical textbook for kindergarten teachers, CATHLEEN GIUSTINO (Chicago) described how Czechoslovak experts defined play. The textbook „Pedagogy of the Preschool Age“, in both the Soviet and Czech versions, held that play was an innate part of children, however innate play needed to be guided by experts in order to properly produce new socialist children. Correct play was seen as a way to integrate children into the life of adults, their work, and their socialist communities. The fantasy of play, then, was to mime reality, to anticipate future roles in society. DANIEL BÖHME (Frankfurt an der Oder) traced the Polish state's quest to create toys that were „national in form and socialist in content.“ Much like Czechoslovakia, toys were meant

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to imbue the child with a love for their own country as well as impart some level of technical understanding. In reality, Polish toys borrowed from East and West Germany and American designs, but also marked a continuation of Polish historical design. In sum, Böhme noted that Polish toys were not „grey,“ but rather a colorful and creative amalgamation into uniquely Polish objects. KERSTIN MARIA PAHL’s (Berlin) discussion delved further into questions of reproductions of socialist values through play. She asked, can a toy really teach one to feel socialist solidarity? Can children define what is and is not socialist? Should children be raised to find beauty in what is socialist? And where, then, is the question of fun? Is it easier to think and feel socialistically when the game is fun?

In his introduction to the second day of the conference, JENS JUNGE (Berlin) offered an interdisciplinary theory of play. Play, while difficult to singularly define, carries with it some combination of enjoyment, repeatability, goallessness, and lack of force to participate. „Pure“ play, in contrast to games, lacks rules. It is by definition useless and unproductive. However, Junge pushed back on the notion that uselessness is inherently bad, offering the example of sleep as something unproductive but highly important. In Junge’s estimation, play is experimentation; it helps us figure out the borders of reality, to develop ourselves and others socially. Role-playing games help answer who-am-I questions and help form self-identity, while construction play seeks to change the world around us. In this way, the self is created through play.

KAI REINHART’s (Münster) work explored the adaption of skateboarder culture in Dresden in the 1980s. East German skateboarding was both a bricolage of culture and a culture of bricolage. It melded together distinctively American elements with East German particularities. Because skateboards were difficult to acquire, skates were often self-made, copying their American progenitors. One witness claimed that the East German skaters deeply related to the ruined buildings of the Bronx and the feelings of injustice African American rappers espoused. By drawing from this, East German

skaters borrowed from the US to make culture uniquely their own. SABINE STACH (Warschau), through the lens of the card game Skat, explored the tension in play between the affirmation of existing social systems and their subversion in the GDR. Under SED rule, the feelings on the game were divided; on the one hand, the game was considered an old proletarian practice, but on the other, a form of gambling. According to one East German newspaper, approximately one in every three East Germans played Skat. The state, however, was hesitant to allow the founding of official state clubs, due to the high prevalence of gambling and its association with drinking. JULIANE BRAUER (Berlin) discussed travel games for GDR Young Pioneers and their educational and utopian content. Traveling games, or games that simulated the concept of traveling to places far or imagined, were a mainstay of Pioneer leisure activities. It was the job of the Pioneer leader, or „tour guide,“ to transform the classroom into an imaginary journey. As technology developed, these journeys became more technologically focused, and often went to space. Thus the Pioneer at play should develop an imagination that could conjure up utopia, tempered with the realities of the real existing aspects of socialism. The discussion that followed, led by THOMAS LINDENBERGER (Dresden), raised the questions of sources, patriotism, and utopianism. In the case of play, how does the historian record the act of play when it is unwritten? Additionally, the future-orientedness of play was brought further into the discussion. The Young Pioneers were seen as future state resources, and thus their education about science and technology was given high priority.

ALEXANDRA EVDOKIMOVA (Berlin) discussed the Soviet war game Zarnitsa and its cultural legacy in Russia. At its core, Zarnitsa was a war game, carried out to mirror the discipline and strategies of a battlefield. During play, the children spent a few days living, exercising, and eating like soldiers. They had to deal with everyday realities such as the weather, and would learn practical skills such as the recognition of stars or the operation of military technology. Zarnitsa, despite having clear thematic bound-

aries on one side, left a lot of freedom for interpretation for the designers and the players. Perhaps because of this, there has been a resurgence of the game in modern Russia. IVANA DRAKULIĆ (Ljubljana), in her investigation of playfulness between adults, focused her talk on child-centered parenthood by asking what role politics and economics play in child-rearing. Drakulić focused on the modern western conception of a child as a subject of future, a public good to receive proper nurturing for the good of society. Thus, child-centeredness: fore fronting attention to and protection of children. However, Drakulić noted a further change in parents' conceptions of childhood in the transition from communism to capitalism in Slovenia. The growing fear of children allowed to roam freely in dangerous public spaces also lead to more after-school activities and therefore less freedom to encounter risks in play. ALEKSANDRA LUCZAK (Frankfurt an der Oder) investigated a Polish architectural project beginning in the early 1970s. The construction of the Central train station in Warsaw served as synecdoche for the desire to create an alternative reality in which the usual rules of social existence were temporarily abolished. The proposed construction, to be filled with discos with English names, game halls, and neon signs, would stand to show that Poland too was an internationally successful country. This complex was to nurture a certain kind of future fantasy of prosperity and thus responded not only to the longings of the population, but also to the fantasies of state socialism. In her discussion, ANJA LAUKÖTTER (Berlin) asked a few important questions, both on the nature of play and on the usage of sources. One of the most important questions that was raised was what really is the difference between socialist and capitalist play?

In his keynote address, THOMAS LINDENBERGER stressed that games are characterized by an enormous plasticity in relation to their political and social environment. They cling to the changes caused by economic cycles, social and political disasters, and war and peace. Because of this, one can use the medium of games and toys to tell the story of an epoch. The GDR featured games as a central structure of the work environment by way

of work „competitions“ that would crown „Heroes of Labor“ for those who produced the most amongst their peers. This, coupled with Olympic sports important for international recognition, brought competition and play to the forefront of GDR society. In Lindberger's estimation, playing trained the sense of „how it could be,“ taught curiosity about how things „end up,“ and how, win or lose, one sought to better themselves through competition.

Starting off the third day, GLEB ALBERT (Zürich) traced anti-communist computer game „cracker“ clubs of the 1980s and their different meanings on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The game „Raid over Moscow,“ which held the Soviet Union as the villain, was enjoyed on both sides of the Iron Curtain. However, for such games to reach the communist side, they had to be first cracked and copied before redistribution. In their copying, they became more than just games, instead becoming also a communication medium, as copying afforded the chance to imbed unique messages. Thus, the anti-communism of Eastern crackers meant something different, more informed by their actual lived experience rather than the voyeuristic imaginaries of the West.

In his presentation, JAROSLAV ŠVELCH (Prague) explored computer game culture in Czechoslovakia leading up to the Velvet Revolution. Focusing on a specific case of a game called Shatokhin, Švelch pointed out that computer hobbies were simultaneously supported by the state, and yet their content was often subversive or irreverent toward state ideology. Computer games were largely ignored because they had the dual benefit of being not well understood by party enforcers and having the rhetorical backing of teaching computer skills. In this way, the creators of such games used the medium as a method of communication, all done under the guise of furthering the goals of communism by way of futuristic technologies. Leading the discussion, SEBASTIAN MÖRING (Potsdam), noted that the computer club culture in late communism and the cracker scene in the West itself was something playful, that is to say that they are games themselves or that they were played in the form of games.

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In both Švelch's and Albert's cases, the actual distribution, modification, and creation of computer games was itself a game of subversion.

**Conference overview:**

*Conference Introduction*

Juliane Brauer (Berlin) / Maren Röger (Augsburg) / Sabine Stach (Warschau)

*Panel 1: Brettspiele / Board Games*

Maren Röger (Augsburg): Welten und Grenzen der sozialistischen Brettspiele / Realms and Boundaries of Socialist Board Games

Nikita Lomakin (Moskau): Self-Made Board Games as a Lieu du Mémoire / Selbstgebaute Brettspiele als Lieu du Mémoire

Martin Thiele-Schweiz (Berlin): Spiel, Staat und Subversion. Nachgemachte Gesellschaftsspiele in der DDR / Games, State, and Subversion. Replicated Parlor Games in the GDR

Kommentar: Christin Lumme (Nürnberg)

*Panel 2: Spielzeug und Zeug zum Spielen / Toys and Things to Play*

Cathleen M. Giustino (Chicago): Children's Playthings and Creativity in Socialist Czechoslovakia / Kinderspielzeug und Kreativität in der sozialistischen Tschechoslowakei

Daniel Böhme (Frankfurt/Oder): „National in der Form und sozialistisch im Inhalt,“ die Geschichte der Designzentren und Bewertungskommissionen für Spiele und Spielzeug in der Volksrepublik Polen / „National in Form, Socialist in Content,“ the History of Design Centers and Evaluation Committees for Games and Toys in the Polish People's Republic

Kommentar: Kerstin Maria Pahl (Berlin)

*Day Two Introduction*

Jens Junge (Berlin): Theorie des Spielens in interdisziplinärer Perspektive / A Theory of Playing from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

*Panel 3: Freizeit und Spiel in der DDR / Leisure Time and Play in the GDR*

Kai Reinhart (Münster): „Oben hinstellen, runterbrettern was das Zeug hält.“ Skateboarden in Dresden (1980–1990) / Skateboarding in Dresden (1980–1990)

Sabine Stach (Warschau): Zwischen Glücksspiel, Sport und deutscher Einheit. Skatspielen in der DDR / Between Gambling, Sports and German Unity. Playing Skat in the GDR

Juliane Brauer (Berlin): Spielend erziehen. Kinderspiele für die Pioniere / Educational Play. Children's Games for the Pioneers

Kommentar: Thomas Lindenberger (Dresden)

*Panel 4: Soziale Praktiken, Spiel und Raum / Social Practices, Play and Space*

Alexandra Evdokimova (Berlin): Das sowjetische Militär-Sport-Spiel „Zarnitsa.“ Zwischen „Wir“ und „Ich“ / The Soviet Military Sports Game „Zarnitsa.“ Between „We“ and „I“

Ivana Drakulic' (Ljubljana): From Free Playing to Paranoid Parenthood. Political Order as a Factor of Children's Play Quality in Slovenia // Vom freien Spiel zur paranoiden Elternschaft. Politische Ordnung als Faktor für die Qualität des kindlichen Spielens in Slowenien

Aleksandra Luczak (Frankfurt/Oder): Der Homo ludens in der spätsozialistischen City: Räume des Spielens im Warschauer Zentrum West / The Homo Ludens in the Late Socialist City: Spaces of Play in Warsaw's West City Centre

Kommentar: Anja Laukötter (Berlin)

*Public Lecture*

Thomas Lindenberger (Dresden): Gesellschaft spielen. Überlegungen zur Kontingenz und Herrschaftspraxis in der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft / Playing Society. Thoughts on Contingence and Practices of Power in the Developed Socialist Society

*Panel 5: Computerspiele / Computer Games*

Gleb J. Albert (Zürich): Antikommunismus als Bindeglied? Computerspielpiraten beiderseits des Eisernen Vorhangs am Ende des Kalten Krieges / Anticommunism as a Link?

Computer Pirates on Both Sides of the Iron  
Curtain at the End of the Cold War

Jaroslav Švelch (Prag): Shielded by Progress:  
Playing and Making Computer Games in  
Communist Czechoslovakia's Computer  
Clubs / Durch den Fortschritt abgeschirmt:  
Spielen und  
Herstellen von Computerspielen in tsche-  
choslowakischen Computer Clubs

Kommentar: Sebastian Möring (Potsdam)

Tagungsbericht *Zwischen Sozialdisziplinierung  
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