

Educational videogame 1969: Case for a Rookie Filmmaker

Methodical guidelines for teachers

This educational game introduces the young generation to the situation in society unleashed by the Soviet invasion in August 1968. The interactive story takes place a few months later, in the early spring of 1969. This is a crucial period when the initially conciliatory approach of the state authorities begins to morph into a systematic consolidation of order at the expense of democratic principles. The protagonist is an aspiring filmmaker who is determined to assert himself in this complicated and uncertain period. However, his starting position is not easy. He has made a provocative student film before and has no choice but to use it as a basis for his path to the film studio. If only a single copy of his film hadn't been stuck on the other side of the re-emerging Iron Curtain...

This visual novel-style game with interactive features is designed for the final years of primary school and for high schools. It offers an unusual enrichment of the curriculum – It allows the players to get acquainted with the realities of Czechoslovakia on the threshold of normalization, to identify with the personal experience of a character inspired by the authentic fate of filmmakers of the 1960s and to adopt an empathetic attitude towards historical events through ethical dilemmas with inevitable consequences. It also provides a model situation in which one can observe the threat to democratic principles and individual freedom, so the game can also enrich the lessons of social sciences.

THEMES

The game's story presents a series of scenarios reflecting the situation of the Czechoslovak population on the threshold of normalization. This allows for a range of prompts and references that can better integrate the game into the learning needs or contexts that are focused by the school curriculum.

The Prague Spring and the August 1968 occupation

The story references the most significant events of the year 1968 and views this period through the eyes of a young character. Through fragmentary impressions, it depicts the liberating atmosphere, the unbridled culture and the hope that the period brought with it. The game can be considered an experiential bridge between the themes of the August invasion and normalization, pointing to an in-between period that did not mark a sharp transition from socialism with a human face to an authoritarian regime. It captures the post-August limbo and uncertainty in which society's surrender to the new totalitarian order was subtly born.

The suppressed defiance

The story itself is set at the turn of March and April of 1969, on the eve of the accession of president Gustáv Husák and the beginning of truly controlled normalization. The most significant event that served as a catalyst for the April plenum definitively ending the era of socialism with a human face was the hockey tournament and the related incident in front of the Soviet airline office Aeroflot. This situation therefore represents the dramatic focus of the game's plot, the protagonist may witness or participate in the riot, which then significantly influences its further direction. The game experience can therefore be linked to the active recognition of this situation, which can resonate with the younger generation. It provides a conspiratorial topic (testimony to the orchestrated provocation by the State Security Services aimed at the removal of president Dubček), personal stories to discover, the availability of published authentic footage and the opportunity to focus on the media's inconsistent approach to reflecting the event (partly taken into account in the game).

The role of security forces in the normalization society

Another key game situation is the manipulative interrogation of the protagonist by members of the security forces, which allows the learning in class to explore the crucial role of these forces in the consolidation of the normalization regime. This is linked not only to the provocative activities during the hockey protests but also to the media manipulation of the time, which can be more interestingly linked with the game's focus on the field of filmmaking – particularly the disinformation campaigns directed against filmmakers. By engaging with the published internal StB materials from the preparation and course of the brutal intervention during the August 1969 demonstrations, the game's situation can be confronted with the transformation of the regime into an admittedly repressive apparatus.

The loss of freedom

The complicated journey across the border with the West is also an important aspect of the plot which provides the most significant starting point for reflection on the topic of freedom repression. For the younger generation, the restriction of freedom of movement is an experience which they have encountered at most during the pandemic, but thanks to that, they are able to identify with it emotionally. The perspective, however, does not need to be limited to physical travelling in itself, but any form of contact with western countries as well. In 1969, hints of isolation and aversion to the West, which enter the game's replicas, began to permeate everyday life again. With the class it is then possible to focus on the examples demonstrating the practical impacts of this divergence. The game also offers allusions to censorship, covert coercion, denouncing, and the unleashing of insecurity – tools with which the suppression of democratic principles can be identified and teacher then can build a concretely supported reflection of this topic on them.

The post-August situation in the eyes of filmmakers

The player views the events through the eyes of a filmmaker for whom it is not easy to assert himself in these complicated times. The learning activities can therefore also focus on the attitudes that the cultural community took towards the changes in society. Despite the growing influence of censorship practices, filmmakers were not indifferent and tried to appeal to society, to send warning signals. The game thus can be supplemented with various examples of works responding in various ways to the tense atmosphere of the time. The follow-up discussion can then focus on their meaning.

The following works offer a thought-provoking way to link the game experience with the film screening:

The Uninvited Guest (1969, Vlastimil Venclík, 22 minutes) – an apt and ironic parallel between the situation of an apartment occupied by an uninvited guest and the society's reactions to the post-August situation. First, the owners of the apartment are rebelling, then they get used to the intruder and at the end even like him. The harsh impacts of this film for an aspiring young director also correspond with the dilemmas of the protagonist in the game, therefore this short student film is the most relevant for educational engagement.

The Seventh Day, the Eighth Night (1969, Evald Schorm, 100 minutes) – allegorical depiction of society's behaviour in a critical situation where fear and insecurity are the main causes of its own destruction. The film reacts to the post-occupation atmosphere and focuses on a crucial aspect of normalization – that society has largely adapted and deprived itself of freedom. The film is suitable for a deeper reflection even given the challenging metaphorical expression. Together with its naturalistic conception, the film is mostly suitable for students of final years of high school.

Bohemian Rhapsody (1969, Vojtěch Jasný, 17 minutes) – a protest against the occupation of his homeland, which was the director's way of saying goodbye to his country before emigrating. Into his wordless film poem, the director imprinted his feelings expressed by strong imagery. It is thus a piece of work that invites us to connect to the dilemmas of the time through an entirely emotional experience. It is suitable for students of final years of high school, as well.

Suspicion (1970, Jan Matějovský, 59 minutes) – a timeless study of human nature highlights how fear and isolation have the ability to deform and warp any human being. A group of men imprisoned in a school classroom during the German occupation have no idea what awaits them, so they preemptively begin preparing for an interrogation. In doing so they make a victim of the weakest among them, and are self-sufficient with the persecution even without the Gestapo. The parallel with the Nazi dictatorship provides a model situation, which aptly reflects the threats of the normalization regime to the nature of the population. The television film allows us to reflect on the general features of totalitarian regimes and is stimulating for confronting key periods of modern Czechoslovakian history.

GAME SITUATIONS AND AUTHENTICITY

The game situations were created in consultation with historians and are based on a careful study of period materials and expert studies. The story of the protagonist is fictional, but it takes inspiration in the experiences and real conditions of filmmakers in the time. Supporting characters and their attitudes are inspired by specific pre-figures, but we have preferred to use made-up names for them. The settings of the story are real and their visual representation is based on accurate photographic references. To evoke the hockey protests that form an important backdrop for the story, we have used the footage from the weekly magazines and got inspired by the published audio recordings of the State Security Services. The creative licence is focused to enlivening the game scenes with visual references to contemporary Czechoslovakian images, including the involvement of fictional film characters.

STARTING AND CONTROLLING THE GAME

The game works offline after downloading. You start it with the file 1969.exe. Once the game is launched, an introductory video follows introducing the characters and historical circumstances of the plot. After the intro, the first interactive choices are provided by a map of Prague, where the player chooses the places to travel to.

The game is based on dialogues with characters, which use voiceovers and written subtitles. The game can be completed by students with hearing impairments or reading difficulties as well. It is possible to turn off the audio if needed, however for the regulation the operating system's audio controls must be used. No parts of the game cannot be skipped or repeated by the students. The variations of the storyline do not vary much in their scope, so the time difference between the individual game lines is minimal.

The game includes several scenes in which the player interacts with various objects (marked with a white outline) that can be reached by simply clicking the left mouse button.

To exit the game, you press the ESC key and click the EXIT button.

We recommend going through the game several times to familiarize with the plot variations and the specific consequences of major decisions before implementing the game into your lessons. Particularly if the teacher wants to engage in a reflection of the game experience, during which the students confront individual passages through the story of the game.

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