Japanese Digital Games in Czech Media Discourse

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Abstract

Japanese console games have been enjoying success on foreign markets since the 1980s, and much has been written about their reception in the United States. The process of the reception of Japanese games is much less evident in the case of Europe, which is much more fragmented and next to impossible to describe precisely in a single study. In this paper, we decided to start the research at a local level and describe the process of the reception of Japanese games in the Czech Republic. Examining texts from the three most influential Czech game magazines of the 1990s, we reconstruct the image of Japan, Japanese games, and developers in the discourse of specialized game press. In our paper, we first describe the conditions that influenced the entrance of Japanese games to the Czech market, and subsequently, we trace shifts in their perception throughout the 1990s. In the early 1990s, we discovered that Japanese games were rarely recognized as such and trace some trends of a gradual shift from othering Japanese games as weird towards accepting their differences while marking essential milestones in their reception.

Introduction

Japanese digital games are a global phenomenon, and as such, they have been a long-standing subject of journalistic and scholarly writing, which also frequently explores the origins of the international success of Japanese games.

The entrance of Japanese games to the American market in the 1980s and their subsequent reception is relatively well documented in many academic texts (see for example: Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003; Altice 2015; Consalvo 2016), but other regions only get brief mentions or are ignored entirely. Tristan Donovan states that "attempts at writing the history of video games to date have been US rather than global histories" (2010, Introduction), and the same can be said about English writing on Japanese games specifically. Chris Kohler, for instance, is seeking to uncover the reason for the worldwide popularity of Japanese games (2016, 2) while barely mentioning non-American markets at all.

We believe that to better understand the process of Japanese games' rise to "worldwide popularity", it is necessary to start the inquiry at a local level before coming to conclusions on a more global scale. Our paper will thus explore the Czech media discourse to identify how Japanese games were received and adopted in the Czech Republic (and Czechoslovakia earlier) in the 1990s.

We aim to demonstrate how the specific conditions of the Czech market influenced the reception of Japanese games and provide an example of this process from a former "Eastern Bloc" country. Doing this, we hope to enrich the English discourse with information from a region that has not been researched in this way and contribute to understanding the (global) history of reception and consumption of Japanese games.

The structure of the paper is as follows: at the outset, we introduce the specific socioeconomic conditions of the region and the state of the game press in the 1990s, which both influenced the reception of Japanese games. Next, we identify some early milestones in their reception in game press, and finally, we analyze some more general currents, including the shifts in the stance towards Japanese games and shifts in the perception of Japanese game genres.

Regional specifics

Throughout this paper, we will demonstrate the

specifics of the reception of Japanese games in the Czech Republic. We will see that their adoption process was different than, for example, in the United States, most notably without the success story of Nintendo that we know from much of the English writing.

A certain Americentrism of English writing is given by many region-specific factors. Some of them could be explained by linguistic reasons, since, as Mark J. P. Wolf states, "Most video game history books (…) are produced largely for a North American audience" (2015, 2), but there are other factors to consider as well such as the prominence of Japanese consoles on the American post-crash market. Another reason is stated by Mia Consalvo who explains her focus on North America by the fact that it was "the dominant Western market and a significant cultural force [that] has shaped the global game industry and game culture." (2016: 14)

While the global importance of the North American market is indisputable, focusing only on one region bears the risk of giving a false impression of a uniform cultural and economic impact of games and of ignoring essential regional differences. Such differences could among else manifest in varying platform and genre preferences, in various distribution networks and channels, shifted timelines of hardware and game reception which can all be observed in European markets.

While Europe is not ignored completely in the English discourse that is crucial for a more "global" approach, (Altice 2015 provides some valuable insights; Lebailly 2020 provides a French treatment of the role of Sega on the French market), the mentions of the region are either very general or focused on a few selected, usually Western European countries.[1] Europe is simply too fragmented to be accurately treated as a single unit.

We will thus focus on the region of the Czech Republic, which is most familiar to us. While still arguably being a "Western" market, it counterbalances writing focused on North America or Western Europe. We will explore what role Japanese games played in the 1990s and how they were received in the specialized press. Before we start the survey of game magazines, it is essential to point out some specifics of the contemporary Czech digital

game market.

One significant factor that caused differences in the development compared to Western Europe was the fact, that Czechoslovakia[2] belonged to the so-called "Eastern bloc", meaning a communist regime ruled it under Soviet influence until 1989 and it was a geopolitical part divided from Western Europe by the so called "iron curtain". Until then, computers were not readily available to the public with the basic options of getting them being either importing the hardware on one's own during limited travels or, in the latter half of the 1980s, buying them in hard currency stores (see Švelch 2018, 47–53). "As media, video games experienced very limited critical exposure before the 1990s, when they were treated mostly as a bizarre technological novelty and something very insignificant." (Vacek 2015, 149), which also meant little media coverage and a later advent of game press compared to, for example, the USA or the United Kingdom.

During the 1990s, the biggest obstacle for Japanese games specifically was the strong position of home computers, which was true in other European countries as well (see Altice 2015, 62). Hardware used during the 1980s was primarily 8-bit home computers, and home computers, in general, were the dominant gaming platform of choice throughout the 1990s as well. Besides historical reasons where information technologies were not to be used (at least in theory) for play only and buying an expensive dedicated gaming machine just for fun might have been hard to justify, another factor cementing the role of computers for gaming was the price of the games. "As the 1980s in Czechoslovakia represented a period where there were no game producers, distributors, or retailers, piracy was the only option and an everyday occurrence." (Vacek 2015, 147) Even after the fall of the regime, when games began to be officially distributed, a more expensive digital game would cost up to about one-third of the average salary in the early 1990s, which meant a large part of the players would copy their games illegally, which was considerably easier to do on home computers than on game consoles.

Perhaps the most noticeable distinction from the American market was the virtual absence of Nintendo on the Czech market until at least 1992. The preference of home computers to game consoles was a trend that was

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[1] We must, of course, not forget other regions as well. There is, for example, relevant English research by Liao that traces the process of Japanese games spreading to the Chinese market during the 1980s and 1990s and describes obstacles that hindered it (see Liao 2015).

[2] The Czech Republic was a part of Czechoslovakia until 1992, when it split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

also visible in other European countries. While in the United States Nintendo filled the vacuum following the Video game crash of 1983, in Europe it was outpaced by Sega in setting up a distribution network (Kline et al. 2003, 136), and even then, the distributors' focus was mainly on Western Europe. Consequently, there was no official Nintendo distribution until 1993[3] in the Czech Republic, when some of the introduced hardware was already obsolete (NES was distributed eight years after its initial release in the United States, SNES after three years, Game Boy after four years).

Japanese games in the non-game press

To explore the image of Japanese games in Czech (or Czechoslovak) media, we examined the three most influential game magazines of the 1990s: *Excalibur*, *Score,* and *Level* that started to be published in 1991, 1994, and 1995, respectively. To get a better perspective of the time into which the magazines emerged, we surveyed non-gaming press and literature for mentions of Japanese games.[4] There were virtually no mentions during the 1980s, and even in the early 1990s, the mentions were scarce. We can say that until about 1992, almost all the writing on Japanese games in non-game press (primarily magazines) comes from translations of foreign sources.

One Czech source, that very briefly mentions both Nintendo and Sega, is a book titled *The Labyrinth of Computer Games* (Bludiště počítačových her) from 1990, that features a glossary, where both Sega and Nintendo are mentioned, but, unlike other entries, they provide an explanation for both companies, meaning they were not much known. For Nintendo, the explanation reads: "their portable games in little boxes are circulating here" (Blažek 1990, 93), which could perhaps point to some circulation of Game&Watch clones.

Possibly one of the first first-hand experiences mentions of Nintendo, albeit very brief, comes from an interview with the famous Czech hockey player Jaromír

Jágr, who in 1991 mentions "playing nintendo" (sic) in his free time in America (Bartík 1991: 11). Phrases such as "playing Nintendo" begin to appear in translated fiction when the average reader likely would not have had a clear idea about what a Nintendo was.

While mentions of Nintendo and Sega get more frequent from 1993 when both companies' consoles began to be sold officially on the Czech market, the *Super Mario Bros.* film screening in Czech cinemas in 1994 is still an occasion that boosted the mentions of Nintendo and Mario very distinctively. The mentions of the film are often accompanied by brief (sometimes misleading)[5] explanations of what these terms mean, which indicates that, again, the average reader of the texts would not be familiar with them. There was even a mention of a venue making the game available to the public at its premises so that people can get familiar with the game before or after watching the film (Wohlhöfner 1994, 8). None of the mentions of the film indicate any Japanese origins of Mario.

These trends show that the negative impact of the "iron curtain", on the spread of (not only) Japanese games, caused by factors such as limited import, expensive hardware, and lack of international cultural exchange, lasted well into the early 1990s and that it took a few more years after the fall of the communist regime before a domestic discourse building on first-hand experience with the games was formed.

Japanese games in Czech game magazines

Before we start the primary analysis of the texts, we need to briefly introduce the magazines and where they were published to better understand their context.

The specialized game press also emerged on the Czechoslovak market only after the fall of the communist regime. As there were no other broadly available and up-to-date sources of information[6] on digital games, game

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[3] We discovered an advertisement by *ENISOF Ltd.* in *Excalibur* No. 12 from September 1992 that offered Sega Master System and Nintendo Game Boy for sale, but it was only in 1993 when *MPM inc.* enters the market and claims to be the exclusive distributor for Nintendo (see *Excalibur* 18 1993, 35 and Wohlhöfner 1994, 8).

[4] Through the *National digital library* archive operated by the Moravian library containing data of many newspapers, magazines, and books, we did a full-text search for occurrences of terms such as Nintendo, Sega, Game Boy, Mario, and Sonic up until 1995.

[5] "An action-comedy in the style of a popular video game inspired by prehistory" (Hospodářské noviny 1995: II) or: "The story of brothers Luigi and Mario, who are saving the princess and fight the reptile king and his monsters, was created based on a computer game [called] Nintendo." Other newspapers also phrase the news as if Nintendo was the name of the game (Chuchma, Halada and Lipčík 1994: 57).

[6] The first program to periodically report on digital games broadcast on Czech television was the British show *Bad Influence!* with a Czech voiceover in 1994 with about a year's lag after the original British schedule. An original Czech game-focused TV show only began to air in 1998.

magazines became the most impactful media on the topic.

As the main subject of our research, we selected the three most influential Czech game magazines of the 1990s, namely *Excalibur* (1991–2000), *Score* (1994–present), and *Level*[7] (1995–present) that also covered the majority of the market during the 1990s. While there were two other notable magazines on the Czechoslovak market in the early 1990s (namely the Slovak magazines *FIFO* published 1990–1993 and *BiT* published 1991–1994), their focus on older platforms (largely 8-bit computers) and negligible focus on Japan led us to exclude them from this study. Similarly, magazines that only began their production in the late 1990s, such as *Gamestar* (1999–2006) and *Official Czech PlayStation Magazine* (Oficiální český PlayStation magazín, 1998–2012) were not included as well. A preliminary search indicated that the magazines showed no significant deviations from the trends discovered in the selected magazines.

For the selected magazines, we did a close reading of relevant articles selected with the help of OCR (optical character recognition) tools from a dataset containing a combined total of 224 issues. We conducted a full-text keyword search for words related to Japanese games and Japan.[8] During the process, we cataloged all the games that were developed in Japan and read texts associated with them. While all occurrences of the keywords were noticed (including advertisements, charts, and catalogs of games), many of them contained no opinions of the authors (such as business reports) and did not contribute to the reconstruction of the image of Japanese games. As a result, the most valuable texts were reviews and previews of games, editorials, and letters from readers and responses to them.

In general, the Czech magazines can be seen as very computer-centric, building on the legacy of various hobby magazines. They were also often connected (namely *Excalibur*, *BiT* and *Score*) to videogame distributors. Their stances will necessarily differ from console-based

magazines, especially those connected to specific publishers (such as the famous *Nintendo Power*).

Excalibur was the first of the selected magazines to appear on the Czechoslovak market in 1991. *Excalibur*'s circulation numbers are not known for most of its existence, but the magazine itself boasted 30 thousand copies in late 1992, while data from 1997 suggest 20 thousand copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2021), which demonstrates that *Excalibur* was likely already past its peak. The magazine stopped publication in 2000 after many format changes.

Score was perhaps the most influential game magazine of the 1990s, with the most considerable circulation usually ranging between 50 and 60 thousand, which was a high number among other monthly magazines (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2021). *Level* was *Score*'s biggest competitor that gradually drew close to its circulation until it got ahead in 1999. While *Score* was known for its extravagant, aggressive style of writing (Vacek 2005, 149), *Level*'s style gradually evolved into a more mature one.

It must be noted that the opinions stated in the magazines are opinions of a relatively small group of journalists (sometimes even eccentric ones who achieved a certain amount of celebrity through their unconventional writing), but with some 100 thousand combined copies in circulation, the game magazines were a force to be reckoned with in shaping the opinions of their readers in the second half of the 1990s. Bach states that one of the factors that helped the commercial success of Czech game magazines was that lifestyle magazines for young men such as *Maxim* or *Esquire* were virtually non-existent and that game magazines were successfully able to fill this gap despite their narrow focus (2011, 121).

The editorial of the first issue of *Excalibur* from January 1991 says: "Surely, there are other computers we should write about – Next, Macintosh, Nintendo (special for gaming). However, as long as these brands are not spread among the users to at least some extent, there is no point in writing about them." (*Excalibur* 1 1991, 1) This shows there was some awareness about the impact of Japanese console gaming on a more global scale, but that it was deemed irrelevant for the Czech market in the very early 1990s.

In 1991 *Excalibur* also mentions Sega once, as the "game arcade giant" (*Excalibur* 7 1991, 15), when reviewing a port of *Golden Axe* for home computers.

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[7] For the sake of clarity, we decided to refer to excerpts of magazines only by the number of the issue and year of print instead of introducing names of authors, who were mostly using nicknames in the (at least earlier) magazines.

[8] An abridged list of searched keywords is as follows: Bandai, Capcom, Donkey Kong, Dragon Quest, Enix, Final Fantasy, Game Boy, Golden Axe, Japan, Kirby, Konami, Mario, Metal Gear, Metroid, Namco, Nintendo, PlayStation, Resident Evil, Sega, SNK, Squaresoft, Street Fighter, Taito, Tecmo, Tekken, Zelda.

Another noteworthy mention of Sega comes in 1992 with a review of a computer version of *Super Hang-On* (*Excalibur* 10 1992, 8). This indicates that Sega was known as an arcade game maker, but there were no mentions of Sega home consoles until 1993.

In this phase, Sega games were mostly enjoyed on home computers, and neither Sega nor the several Japanese games (by Sega or not) that were enjoyed by players and mentioned in the magazines were in any way seen as Japanese. Perhaps even the fact that the games were enjoyed on the same hardware as other games gave no extra reason to consider their place of origin.

The arrival of game consoles

As we will see, the stance of the examined magazines towards game consoles was changing through time, and the barriers posed by hardware preferences and availability appear to be of crucial importance in the acceptance of Japanese games. For this reason, we offer a more detailed discussion of the consoles' initial reception.

In 1993 a notable series of articles appeared in *Excalibur* that serves as an introduction to console gaming. These articles were promised to readers since September 1992, but it took some half year until they were finally published in the third issue of 1993 in April. This, together with the fact that most issues of *Excalibur* of the first half of 1993 suddenly add Nintendo and Sega to their front covers and contain an extensive advertisement for both brands inside the magazines, makes it evident that the featuring of such articles was a part of an advertising campaign for both Sega and Nintendo's products entering the Czech market through local distributors.

The articles themselves are not uncritical, though, and their discussion of the pros and cons of game consoles brings an interesting insight into the perception of such devices at the time. The first article from the series offers a tongue-in-cheek terminology of gaming devices, where they are divided into arcade machines, which were found usually in trucks driving them around the country, home computers, and "so-called GAME GEARS or CONSOLES," prompting the readers, even, to come up with a correct name for the last category (*Excalibur* 16 1993, 30). This lack of proper vocabulary demonstrates how rare console gaming was in the Czech Republic of 1993. The article goes on to recommend consoles in case "we want a device exclusively for gaming, we are afraid of loading programs into our devices and think we will not

be able to learn it" and goes on to state that consoles would provide an experience similar to arcades on a level between 8-bit and 16-bit computers, but that the players should keep in mind they would not be getting any sophisticated adventure or strategy games (*Excalibur* 16 1993, 30).

This introductory article is followed by reviews of Sega Mega Drive, Sega Master System II, and Super Engine II, a Czechoslovak copy of the PC Engine console. The Mega Drive review praises the broad color spectrum, smooth scrolling, and stereo music and calls it one of the most technically advanced "home video automats". On the other hand, the reviewer warns of the high price of games and says: "Whatever I might think of piracy and game copying with the MEGA DRIVE, as well as with other home automats that use cartridge modules, you will not copy a single byte." (*Excalibur* 16 1993, 31) While game magazines often criticized piracy (partly because of their close relationships with game distributors), here the price problem was stressed repeatedly. The Master System II review also admires the graphics and smoothness of the games while stating the controls and genres of available games as drawbacks: "You can only get sports, action, and shooting games but there are absolutely no adventures, text games or dungeon crawlers." (*Excalibur* 16 1993, 31) Super Engine II is mentioned as a more budget-friendly option. All the reviews of consoles are also accompanied by reviews of games for the platforms, but their reception is lukewarm at best, with *Sonic, The Hedgehog* ranking the highest with a score of 75%.

The next issue of *Excalibur* from May 1993 brings a review of Sega Game Gear which praises game loading times, durability, and the possibility to enjoy it without occupying a television and criticized the unusual control scheme of some games and the lack of Czech localization of the manual. The author also expresses his surprise at the depth of the game *Shinobi* reviewed together with the console and rates is highly at 88%. He also states that while buying all the games is expensive, many people are already willing to trade their game cartridges. This suggests some spread of Sega consoles.

The following issue of *Excalibur*, the last one in the series that states the words Nintendo and Sega on its cover, contains reviews for two more pieces of hardware: the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and the Game Boy. First, Nintendo is introduced and repeatedly described as a Japanese company, which is one of the first relevant

mentions of Japan in the magazine (previous brief mentions are connected to Konami and Taito and their *Block Hole* and *Arcanoid* (sic) games, respectively both mentioned in 1991). This contrasts with no mentions of Japan made in connection with Sega neither in this series of console-oriented articles, nor in earlier published texts, even though the company itself is mentioned substantially more often than Nintendo. Sega's arcade cabinets and (ported) games have already been present on the Czech market to some extent and it is possible that the novelty of Nintendo made the author investigate the company's origins while Sega is only introduced as the "arcade giant and a world-famous company" (*Excalibur* 16 1993, 30).

Game Boy is presented as a successful portable console that is ready to use but is only equipped with a black and white display and offers only very simple games. The SNES review mainly focuses on its technical parameters, but presumably trying to dispel genre prejudices, the availability of simulators (such as *Wing Commander*), strategy games (*Sim City*), and the expected release of *Dungeon Master* is pointed out. This series of articles again repeatedly stresses the single-purpose nature of game consoles and encourages the readers to consider whether it would not be a better idea to pay a little more for a multi-purpose home computer. A similar PC-centric perspective on NES is observed by Altice in the UK magazine *The Games Machine* in 1987 (2015, 243).[9]

After this series of articles, the magazine goes back to its rather reserved stance towards consoles, although some published letters from readers indicate some fanbase of Sega consoles.

What can be taken away is that their computer gaming habits have heavily shaped the authors' preferences. They appear to prefer joysticks to gamepads, and the limited availability of specific genres popular from home computers is mentioned as one of the most significant drawbacks of game consoles, which will be a recurring

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[9] One anecdotal piece of evidence demonstrating the platform differences between the Czech and American markets comes from an agitated fan letter from 1996 published in one of the examined magazines: "I am 17 and I'm in USA to study here for a year. (…) In my school there are over 1000 students, and NOBODY plays on PC. Everybody owns a SEGA or NINTENDO and that's it! Nobody knows masterpieces such as CIVLIZATION, DUNE, DOOM, SYSTEM SHOCK, CRUSADER, BIOFORGE or ULTIMA! Home at Czechia I had many friends who played on PC. Here I don't even have one!" (*Score* 30 1996, 103)

theme. The reviews appeared to be more optimistic about the concept of portable gaming devices, which had no direct competition in home computers. Nintendo's Japanese origin is stressed with the introduction of its consoles to the Czech market, while Sega's Japanese origins remain unnoticed or unstated.

This is a *Japanese* game

Disregarding the Japanese origins of digital games was certainly not a phenomenon specific for the Czech market. Koichi Iwabuchi names video games as one of the Japanese "culturally odorless" exports that do not evoke any idea of Japaneseness, while other critics have titled such products as *mukokuseki*, or without nationality (2002, 27). This section will try to identify a point in the discourse when Japanese games start to be identified as different.

Tendencies not to stress the Japanese origins of some products is distinguishable in our research subject: the disregard for their Japanese roots is noticeable with the above-mentioned Sega consoles and with a few Japanese games that were fairly popular with Czech players in the early 1990s. Examples of these are *Golden Axe* reviewed in *Excalibur* in 1991, *Dynablaster* (the European title for *Bomberman*) introduced in a retrospective article in *Level* in 1997 as "the most popular multiplayer game of the 90's" (*Level* 27 1997, 94), or *Street Fighter II* that was reviewed across several magazines in 1993 without any mention of Japan.

A certain turning point, in this regard, was the game *Knights of Xentar*. Originally released as *Dragon Knight III* in Japan in 1991, this RPG with erotic elements received extensive coverage in Czech game magazines in 1995. In February 1995, a review was published in *Score*, in May 1995, a walkthrough was published in *Level*, and in October 1995, an eight-page long review rating the game as "one of the best games ever" (*Excalibur* 50 1995, 101) was printed in *Excalibur*.

The *Score* review of *Knights of Xentar*, quite in accord with *Score*'s reputation, starts with a scandalous claim that "The Japanese are a strange, strange people." (*Score* 14 1995, 23) which is one of the earlier examples of a newly forming discourse that presents Japan as a weird country. Very relevant for our investigation is the opening paragraph of the review:

"When I say 'Japanese computer games', many of you will only imagine a black space – that will be those of

you, who never saw any Japanese games. The others will start to pay attention and imagine games for Japanese machines by Nintendo and SEGA – a very diverse body of games from classic shooters and action games to downright perverse games (take notice – most of the games for SEGA and Nintendo machines actually come from Japan!). Among console games, there is a special kind that is characteristic for Japanese products. They are adventure games where the player controls a little character, travels countries of various sizes, and undertakes various quests. The interface of these games is usually very similar and differs only depending on the hardware used (these games are characteristic for the beginnings of machines such as GAME BOY, NES, GAME GEAR, or MASTER SYSTEM, but we can find similar ones on SNES or MEGA DRIVE)." (*Score* 14 1995, 23)

The author goes on to describe Japanese animated films in a similar manner. This means that in early 1995 the image of Japanese games (and animation) was still very vague and needed more explanation. The remark pointing out that most games for Japanese consoles are indeed Japanese only proves the idea that most Japanese games up to this point were seen as *mukokuseki* products. The *Excalibur* review does not mention Japan to such an extent but draws a connection to Japanese comics. *Knights of Xentar*, with its *manga* graphics and quirky erotic scenes, became a point of reference for describing the distinct Japanese visual style or pointing out the weirdness or eroticism of Japanese games for a relatively long time (e.g., "Japanese games will always be different (remember Xentar)." (*Score* 27 1996, 38) or "If you saw none [of Japanese animated series], you might know similar characters from the old Knights of Xentar game." (*Score* 63 1999, 39)). All three magazines applauded the game's qualities, but the fact that it was one of the first Japanese RPGs available for home computers on the Czech market must also not be discounted.

Knights of Xentar was not the first impulse for the writers to present Japan or Japanese games as weirdly different and erotic – such mentions began to appear in *Score* in 1994 already when we learn about the rising popularity of sexual virtual machines in Japan (*Score* 9 1994, 58) or about the difficulty of *Super R-Type* that must have been made with the maniac Japanese player in mind (*Score* 11 1994, 55). Remarks that portray Japan as weird in a relatively negative way (and that are more typical for

the aggressive style of *Score*) are gradually complemented by comments that view the Japanese otherness as positive.

This can be seen for example, when the game *Parodius* is described as "a chill crazy game, that lets you enjoy the eccentric ideas of Japanese programmers" (*Level* 16 1996, 54) or when Princess Maker 2 is described as a strange game that is surprisingly complex and sophisticated (*Score* 43 1997, 62). A review of *Virtual Kids* for Sega Saturn, whose games were reviewed in *Level* for a brief period, states that "The Japanese have a different idea of what is fun and what is not. Sometimes it works in Europe, sometimes it does not." (*Level* 23 1997, 83)

While a gradual shift towards acceptance of the differences of Japanese games can be observed, some preconceptions about Japanese games still prevail, such as the view that Japanese games tend to have overly complicated stories, that can be seen, for example, in the review of *Star Gladiator*, where the author says, that its "absurd story is another of many products of the crazy Japanese minds." (*Score* 37 1997, 104)

Genre perceptions

Concurrently with the changing views of the qualities of Japanese games, the perception of what their common genres are was also shifting. In the earlier "*mukokuseki* years," when Japan is not mentioned as frequently in the texts, these notions are mostly pointed at console game genres in general. In this section, we examine how the perceptions of Japanese game genres gradually evolved, culminating in the introduction of Japanese RPGs to the Czech market in the second half of the 1990s, which marks the last substantial shift in the image of Japanese games covered by this paper.

As stated earlier, some of the common sentiments pointed towards game consoles were that their potential buyers would not be able to play some of the favorite genres such as role-playing games (and their subcategory of dungeon crawlers), strategies, and adventure games.[10] The game consoles are repeatedly described as the domain of platformers (titled as "jumpers" or "runners" in some texts), sometimes ridiculed as too primitive or childish. This illustrates that the long prevalence of home computers

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[10] In the Czech magazines of the 1990s, adventure games would primarily refer to point-and-click adventures, which would be different from the more text-based games known as "adventure games" in Japan.

and the absence of game consoles from the market hindered access to many Japanese games and significantly shaped the preferences of many players.

After Japan became more frequently mentioned in the texts, from about 1995, it was mainly connected with fighting games, brawlers, and platforming games. The perception of genres is often based on one or few concrete games praised for their quality or distinctiveness that helped form the meaning of the term used to describe the genre as a whole. For example, the fighting games genre is often mentioned as a legacy of games such as *Virtua Fighter* or *Tekken*. Also, when reviewers tried to encapsulate a subset of games with similar attributes, new critical vocabulary emerged, such as *karate games* or *manga-style games*. Thus, even a single game and its impact could have been formative for the fan speak terminology. The stereotypical view of common Japanese game genres can be seen in a preview for the game *Ark of Time* which the author mistakenly considers a Japanese game since it was published by KOEI. He is surprised the Japanese would make an adventure game, stating: "I have always thought that only heaps of fighting games and possibly some fanciful 'manga' projects are made in Japan." (*Level* 27 1997, 19)

A significant shift in perception of what a Japanese game is can be observed around the intense marketing efforts of Sony and its PlayStation console and particularly around the commercial success of *Final Fantasy VII*. In 1996 one of the news articles predicts a bright future for Sony PlayStation, noting its unprecedented advertising campaign across a range of printed media, but points out that despite these efforts, the distribution of the games is too slow, and players would only be getting last year's games with Czech manuals while wishing for new games such as *Resident Evil* (*Level* 19 1996, 50).

PlayStation was the first genuinely successful game console on the Czech market, which is evident from the magazines as well. The attitude of all three examined magazines towards console games was changing through time. As they were magazines primarily dedicated to computer gaming, some readers voiced their opinions that writing about consoles was a waste of space, while others demanded more console game reviews. In the "letters from readers" section, one reader says: "I also do not like the part dealing with 'Saturn'. People interested in that can read the SEGA News magazine," which is met by this answer: "No more. Sega is gone from *Score* as it had

(unlike PlayStation) a negligible response from the readers." (*Score* 38 1997, 12) The small demand for Sega-related information is also demonstrated by the fact that the mentioned *SEGA News* magazine ceased publication only after the release of three issues in late 1996.

Here a point can be made about the role of Sega in shaping the discourse. While Lebailly stresses that Sega played a large part in France towards a positive representation of Japan (2018, 75), in the Czech discourse, the Japaneseness of certain games only started to get noticed later, at a time when Sega was already being overshadowed by Sony and its role can be thus seen as less important in this matter.

On the other hand, PlayStation got a dedicated magazine that spun off *Score*, titled *Official Czech PlayStation Magazine*, that enjoyed a steady following and was published from 1998 to 2012. While this proves PlayStation's popularity, it led to removing PlayStation reviews from *Score* and presumably lessened its coverage of Japanese games. In *Level*, reviews of console games remained a part of the magazine, resulting in more mentions of Japanese games, and a temporary section titled "visions of Japan" was included in 1997 that contained pictures and previews of games whose release in Europe was uncertain.[11]

With the release and success of *Final Fantasy VII*, another genre began to be perceived as typically Japanese: a specific kind of RPG. *Final Fantasy VII* received substantial space in *Level*: it got a preview, a long review, and a special extra-long article about the franchise (*Level* 61 2000, 48-55). We need to keep in mind that most of the franchise was not released in Europe until 2002 and was simply unknown to the local audience. The franchise's impact was also possible thanks to the release of ports of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* for home computers. Perhaps due to the success of these particular games, the notion of Japanese games being different but not inferior to Western games is more noticeable. A difference in game design between "traditional" RPGs and Japanese RPGs is reflected in a preview for *Final Fantasy VIII*: "Despite numerous objections, mostly coming from people who could not fully get to grips with the Japanese

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[11] This section as well as much other *Level*'s writing on console games was authored by Martin Kalivoda and his personal interest in the topic had a noticeable influence on the magazine's coverage of Japanese games.

concept of role-playing games, it should be noted that the Final Fantasy saga, whose origins date back to the days of eight-bit consoles, was never designed as a pure RPG...” (*Score* 68 1999, 16) This is also a good example of a tendency to stress that Japanese games take some getting used to, which we can also see in the review for *Suikoden II*, where the author states that it "is a typical Japanese RPG – if someone uninformed sees it, they will mostly ask what kind of children's game it is." (*Level* 59 1999, 106)

Japan, rarely connected with specific games before 1995, is now called "the Mecca of all kinds of games" (*Level* 24 1997, 69), the Japanese contributions to the fighting game genre are fully recognized (*Level* 37 1998, 100). An interview with a Japanese game designer is also featured for the first time (*Level* 53 1999, 94).[12] Compared to the writing on Japanese games from the first half of the 1990s, the texts towards the end of the millennium are much more accepting of Japanese games, and some authors are beginning to acknowledge their strengths.

Conclusion

This paper reconstructed the process of reception of Japanese games in the Czech Republic during the 1990s, examining primarily game magazines. Going through articles of the three most important Czech game magazines of the 1990s (*Excalibur*, *Score*, and *Level*), we looked for mentions of Japan, Japanese games, and their makers to determine how those were described and how their image changed in time.

Perhaps the most significant discovery was the realization of the importance of the preferred gaming platform, which only stresses the importance of the recent trend of *platform studies*. The preference of home computers for gaming influenced the reception of Japanese games in two main ways. Firstly, the number of Japanese games available for home computers was limited: before the spread of game consoles, the discourse was dominantly shaped only a limited number of games ported for computers. Secondly, the preferences and expectations of players were heavily shaped by the consumption of computer games and were not always met by Japanese

games. Generally, this could suggest that a long absence of a game or genre from a market creates an additional barrier for its later entry.

Observing the gradual shift in the image of Japanese games in the Czech discourse, we saw that in the first half of the 1990s, few connections were made between Japanese games and their Japanese origins despite the success of games such as *Golden Axe* or *Street Fighter II*. This supports the view that Japanese games were *mukokuseki* or *culturally odorless* and that their country of origin was not deemed relevant for the reviews. At the same time, it can also indicate a certain lack of available information.

Approximately from 1994, we saw Japan and its games being presented rather negatively, primarily as weird, perverted, or inferior to computer games. A significant milestone in the reception of Japanese games were reviews of *Knights of Xentar* in 1995. While they fit within the stereotype, for the first time, they connected the game's "manga" visuals to Japan and were early examples of drawing attention to the Japanese origins of a game. This also shows the importance of the "trademark" manga visuals that were presumably easier to identify than, for example, specific game mechanics. The impact of games with distinct manga visuals on the perception of Japanese games could be further verified in different markets as well.

While texts ignoring the Japanese origins of games and texts stressing their otherness continue to appear, around 1996, some of them begin to describe the differences of Japanese games as positive. Because the number of authors writing about Japanese games was limited, their personal opinions might have influenced the tone of the discourse to a certain degree. At the same time, the general trends in the acceptance of Japanese popular culture appear to move in the same direction as was observed in the analyzed texts.

A shift can also be observed in the perception of game genres connected to Japan. Although in the early 1990s, the connection was mostly made with platformers, later, around the half of the 1990s, Japanese fighting games and their Japanese origins began to receive attention. Finally, after the introduction of PlayStation to the Czech market, most notably after the release of *Final Fantasy VII*, a specific type of Japanese RPG begins to be recognized and is presented as something that needs getting used to. A similar trend of gradual acceptance of the differences of

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[12] It is presented as an interview with Hiroguchi Yamata, the "spiritual father" of the Final Fantasy series. We have not been able to identify the interviewee, and it is possible the name (perhaps Hironobu Sakaguchi's) was stated incorrectly. Regardless of this, the point is that a Japanese game maker was deemed relevant for the first time in Czech game magazines.

Japanese games and a slow acknowledgment of their qualities is apparent in various texts dealing with Japanese games in the late 1990s.

While it was not in the scope of this paper to conduct an extensive comparison with other markets, some general differences with the North American (and to some extent French) market are apparent. The specific Czech conditions postponed the reception of Japanese games and led to a different image of the major actors and their products. While a detailed comparison might be a task for the future, this paper can already provide a certain counterbalance to the writing focused mainly on the North American market and prevent some generalizations in the future research of the global impact of Japanese games.

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