

Arcades on Wheels: The Materiality and Logistics of Itinerant Gaming in Socialist Czechoslovakia

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INTRODUCTION: GAMING BEYOND THE HOMEBREWER

The historiography of digital games in the former Eastern Bloc has been substantially defined by the narrative of the "homebrew programmer". As Švelch (2018) documents, this culture was characterized by intellectual engagement, where users utilized state-sponsored computer clubs to learn programming and distribute software on cassette tapes. However, alongside this participatory culture existed a parallel, strictly consumerist, and largely undocumented phenomenon: the traveling arcade. While Western arcade culture was anchored in fixed architectural typologies—the shopping mall, the boardwalk, dedicated amusement centers (Huhtamo 2005)—the Czechoslovak equivalent was predominantly mobile, dependent on the infrastructure of traveling showfolk.

This paper explores the Czechoslovak arcade not as a static venue, but as a mobile infrastructure operated by traveling showfolk. Unlike state-sponsored computer clubs embedded within the ideological framework of "polytechnic education," the arcade functioned within a "grey economy" of tolerated private enterprise. By analyzing the material environment of the *maringotka* (the funfair caravan) and the technical labor required to maintain it, the paper develops a material history of socialist gaming that highlights the intersection of marginalized social classes, smuggled Western technology, and the "somatic pleasure" of arcade gameplay (Swalwell 2008).

Methodologically, the paper combines archival research, oral history, and material analysis to reconstruct a largely undocumented gaming infrastructure. Archival sources include period photographs and contemporary press coverage related to traveling fairs and amusement operations. Oral history interviews with former arcade operators constitute a central component of the research, following Portelli's (1991) understanding of oral testimony as a source of social meaning and lived experience rather than merely factual verification, together with oral history methodologies outlined by Ritchie (2015). These interviews are complemented by material analysis of a preserved *maringotka* currently under restoration by the authors, alongside surviving arcade cabinets and hybridized hardware assemblies. Drawing on media archaeology and repair studies, the paper examines the arcade not only as a cultural text, but as a logistical and technical assemblage shaped by scarcity, improvisation,

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and continual maintenance. The restoration process itself functions as a form of experimental media archaeology, enabling direct examination of construction methods, circulation practices, and repair techniques otherwise absent from written records.



Figure 1: The "Maringotka" as Venue. Left: Archival photograph of a gaming caravan at a Czechoslovak fair (c. 1988). Right: The preserved caravan currently under restoration by the authors (2024).

THE MARINGOTKA: ARCHITECTURE OF THE GREY ZONE

Central to this history is the *maringotka*—a caravan traditionally used for housing circus staff, later adapted in the 1980s into a mobile gaming parlor. Operating within a “grey economy” of tolerated private enterprise (Velinger 2015), the *maringotka* occupied a space largely outside the institutional structures that shaped socialist computing culture.

Our material analysis of a recently acquired caravan (see Figure 1) reveals it as a purpose-built architectural solution to the logistical constraints of the socialist shortage economy. Inside bespoke trailers, the space was customized to create a sensory enclave of “mobile heterotopia” (De Cauter and Dehaene 2008) lined with mirrors, foil, and colored lights. This design was not merely aesthetic; it functioned as a spatial tactic to maximize the “somatic pleasure” (Swalwell 2008) of the experience, overwhelming the player with Westernized visual and auditory stimuli. Unlike the computer clubs, which required literacy, patience and technical knowledge, the *maringotka* offered immediate, visceral gratification—a “pay-per-play” model otherwise anathema to the non-commercial logic of the socialist economy.

TOMÁŠ SMUTNÝ AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF REPAIR

While home computers like the ZX Spectrum were often smuggled individually by tourists, maintaining a fleet of arcade machines required a centralized, albeit informal, infrastructure. Western hardware was notoriously fragile, prone to failure in the rough environment of rural fairgrounds, and official spare parts were non-existent. With no manufacturer support from companies like Sega or Namco, a culture of “bricolage” repair emerged.

A key figure in this narrative is Tomáš Smutný, a technician who became a central node in this grey network. As documented in recent historiography (Bach 2012; Švelch 2018), Smutný exemplifies the “golden hands” (*zlaté ručičky*) archetype. Unlike the solitary homebrewer, Smutný operated on a quasi-industrial scale. He and his peers

developed standardized methods for grafting Western logic—smuggled without cabinets to save space and avoid customs scrutiny—onto socialist hardware. These hybrid artifacts serve as material evidence of "broken world thinking" (Jackson 2014), where repair is not merely restorative but generative. By reconfiguring the obsolescent and the incompatible, technicians like Smutný engaged in a "distinctive art of repair" that redefined the lifespan and value of Western hardware in the Eastern Bloc, making it a distinctive instance of what Guins conceptualizes as the video game afterlife (2014).

THE OPERATOR'S PERSPECTIVE: ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREY ZONE

Preliminary findings from oral history interviews reveal a distinct class dynamic. For operators, the arcade worked primarily as an economic engine. The machines were viewed as relatively "effortless" revenue generators compared to the manual labor of setting up and maintaining carousels. The "closed" nature of the arcade cabinet—a black box that swallowed coins—contrasted sharply with the "open" nature of the home computer, which invited programming and modification.

This research highlights the intersectional nature of this pleasure: the showfolk, often stigmatized by the regime for their mobile and "illicit" livelihood (Skočovská 2021), became unexpected gatekeepers of digital entertainment for the working class. They facilitated a "pay-per-play" access model that often represented the only alternative for those who lacked the cultural capital, technical literacy, or institutional connections to join computer clubs.

CONCLUSION

The Czechoslovak mobile arcade challenges the binary of "state oppression vs. individual resistance." The *maringotka* was a vessel that carried the "forbidden fruit" of Western interactive entertainment into the heart of the Eastern Bloc, yet it was sustained through distinctly local forms of material ingenuity. By focusing on the logistical infrastructure of traveling showfolk and the technical labor of bricoleurs like Smutný, this paper revises the history of socialist gaming to include the heavy, dusty, and mobile reality of the fairground.

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