



Svoboda 1945: life after World War II

Interview with Vít Šisler

*Svoboda 1945*¹ is a game in development by indie studio Charles Games (Prague, Czech Republic). It is scheduled for release later in 2020. In this game, you will live in a small town in the Czechoslovak-German border, right after World War II is over. The region is marked by the violence of the war and the instability after the Nazi troops retreated. The story of the game is told through interactive comics and mini-games, with real (and rare) film footage and cinematic-style interviews. The game, like its forebear *Attentat 1942*², was developed in close partnership with professional historians from the Institute of Contemporary

History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

To better understand the history behind *Svoboda 1945*, the Journal of Geek Studies interviewed Vít Šisler, lead designer at Charles Games. We learned a lot about the game and about Czech History too, so keep reading to find out more.

Q: *Svoboda 1945* is interesting in so many ways, so we'll start with the aspect that most got our attention. Your previous game, *Attentat 1942*, focused on the time during World War II and Nazi occupation,



¹ You can find it at <https://www.svoboda1945.com/>

² You can find it at <http://attentat1942.com/>

which one could argue it's the usual way to go for games (and movies etc.) dealing with the topic. *Svoboda 1945*, however, takes place after the war ended and the Nazi retreated from Czechoslovakia³. So how did this choice was made? What sparked the idea for this game?

A: From the start we wanted to have a series of games that is tied up with our national history and maps the second half of the 20th century. As in many other countries, the end of World War II didn't bring instant peace. In the case of Czechoslovakia, there was a mass expulsion of German-speaking citizens, which is still a matter of heated debates today. Also, the country started aligning itself with the Soviet Union and in 1948 turned into a totalitarian state after communist coup d'état. Post-war times are actually the source of many grudges, national traumas, unresolved personal and political conflicts. This is what we wanted to explore in *Svoboda 1945*. The echoes of war still reverberate through our game village, but on the backdrop, many other issues arise – can vengeance be justified? What memories should be kept alive? And at what cost?

And what's it like to be confronted with moral ambiguity inside your own family?

As for the series – it allows us to capture how world events struck the lives of the individuals. We have recurring characters and players can see how they coped both with occupation and post-war reconciliation. It allows us to explore these topics much deeper.

Q: Like *Attentat 1942*, *Svoboda 1945* is a collaboration between Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences, between game developers and historians. How did you manage to pick the interest of historians to participate in a game? And how does this relationship work?

A: At the very beginning, we created an educational simulation for Czech history teachers within a grant project financed by the Czech Ministry of Culture. The historians agreed to participate in this project, particularly because they were interested in seeing the results of their research used beyond academia. Upon seeing we are tru-



³ The country was split in 1938 following the Munich Agreement (a.k.a. Munich Betrayal) and largely incorporated into Nazi Germany. Its government, however, continued to operate in exile, known as the Provisional Government of Czechoslovakia. After the war, the country was re-established, except for the Subcarpathian Ruthenia territory, which became part of Soviet Ukraine.

ly devoted to the subject, convincing them that we should make a proper, public, international game wasn't that hard. But they didn't initially trust the idea and I guess for good reasons. Games are not exactly known for their historical accuracy and sensitivity. But gradually we found a way to work together which turned out to be inspiring in both ways. Our historians didn't only help us to be historically accurate, but they did write the stories, they became script writers, authors of the game and in the end game designers. I think they enjoyed working in a totally different way than they are used to and we definitely learned a lot outside of our area of expertise. We wrote a whole devblog⁴ about it and we recommend everyone to try to get other than traditional game-oriented professionals involved. *Attentat 1942* or *Svoboda 1945* couldn't have happened without them. They kept our game development work within historically sensitive bounds.

Q: There are some games out there with a healthy dose of historical backgrounds,

such as Ubisoft's *Valiant Hearts* and *Assassin's Creed* and, more recently, *Through the Darkest of Times* by Paintbucket Games. How do you approach History in *Svoboda 1945*?

A: Having a historical background in a game isn't the same as making a serious historical video game. From the onset we knew we wanted to make a game that not only uses history as a setting, but is about history. So not only we strive to be historically-accurate, meaning nailing the visuals etc. right, but we are showing the past from multiple perspectives, focusing on how ordinary people lived through the tumultuous times. More importantly, in our games we discuss how different people talk about the past, how history and memories are framed and reproduced. *Attentat 1942* and *Svoboda 1945* try to shed light on the past from an angle that is different to the succession-of-dates kind of approach. We want to see the human side of "big history", tackling topics that go very deep in the national and international psyche. Also, unlike other games, we don't let you play history. *Attentat 1942* takes place in 2001, and you are ret-



⁴ See it here: https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/OndrejTrhon/20200213/357817/When_history_gets_interactive_Attentat_1942_Svoboda_1945_and_historical_research.php

respectively delving into memories of your relatives and other people you meet, but you can't change the past.

Q: Do you believe developers have a responsibility when representing history in their games? Should it be a priority over artistic freedom?

A: I don't think that there has to be an inherent conflict between responsibility and artistic freedom. You can create a fun and commercially successful game without necessarily stereotyping the past. Yet, it is important to know as a developer that video games are indeed capable of shaping our perception of the past, as any other media. We at Charles Games believe that we can create games that are serious and have capacity to touch players, make people reflect, and show them something important about the world.

Q: Let's get more into the gaming side now. In simple terms, *Svoboda 1945*⁵ is a dialog-based adventure game, right? So, what exactly is the players' goal in it?

A: It is an adventure game with a lot of FMV⁶ sequences, interactive comics, and playable memories, which are basically short games, like the one in which you develop photographs one of the characters took during post-war expulsions in a dark room. The year is 2001, you arrive in the village as a researcher who should decide if a local school could be demolished. The village is in the Czechoslovak-German borderlands and its inhabitants experienced occupation, horrors of the Holocaust, liberation, post-war cruelties, as well as forced collectivisation after the communist putsch, all of it. So, you find yourself in a very contentious place and then you find out that your own family was also involved. So a rather administrative task turns into a personal quest. Traumas run deep...

Q: Does the game follow the story of a single character then?

A: We have a protagonist, the researcher, but you meet a lot of people along the way. Formerly expelled German woman, returning to the village for the first time since childhood. Local chronicler whose



⁵ 'Svoboda', by the way, means 'freedom'.

⁶ FMV is short for 'full motion video'

friend died during liberation. Holocaust survivor. Son of a local communist official turned successful businessman. Many others.

Q: How faithfully does the game follow real-life events?

A: The village in *Svoboda 1945* is fictional, because of ethical reasons. As is the case with *Attentat 1942*, all our main characters are constructed, but based on historical research and existing memories. We reference a lot of actual events in the game, we also have an encyclopedia where you can read all about them. Everything that happens in the game generally happened to somebody, somewhere after 1945, but perhaps a little differently, as we also need some space for game design and script writing. Yet, we try to be as truthful as possible. Every single character, utterance, or object in the game was written or approved by professional historians.

Q: Can we expect authentic historic footage and interviews in *Svoboda 1945* like

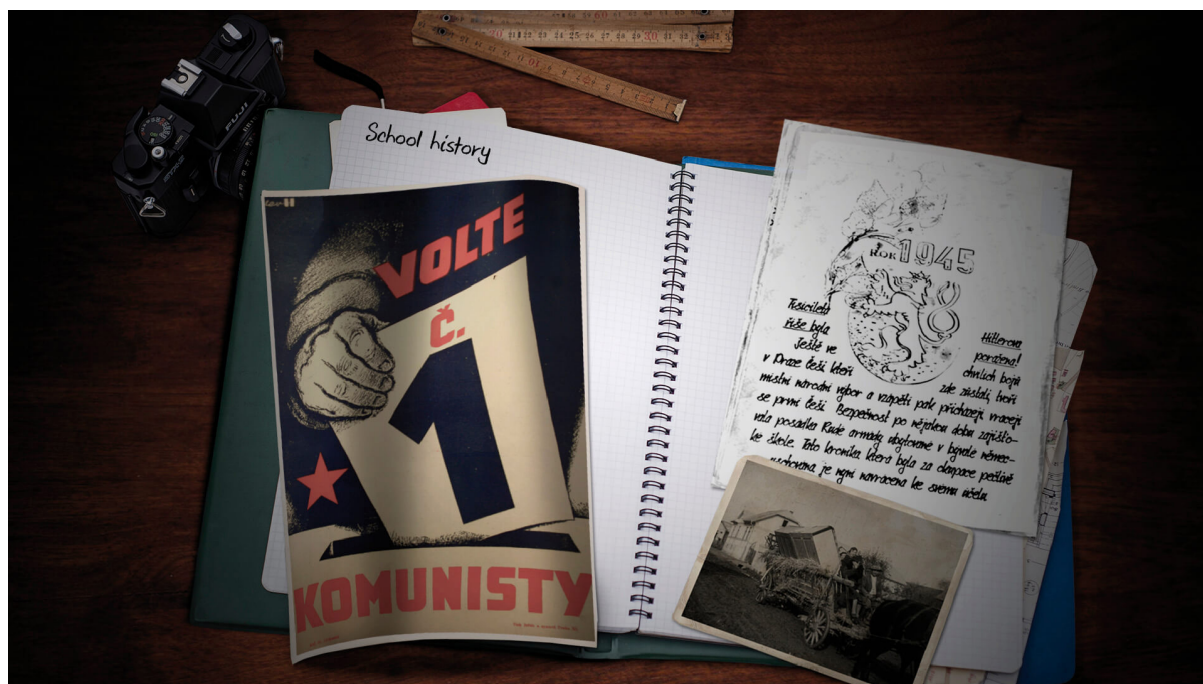
we've seen in *Attentat 1942*?

A: Yes, it's there. Historical footage is as important as our comics and full motion videos. They all serve storytelling purposes. While we use historical footage to reference real historical events, black and white comics depict the constructed past of our protagonists. By doing this we want to make the constructedness of our characters transparent, rather than obfuscating it.

Q: Besides those mentioned above, what other kind of source material has made into the game?

A: Our historians went through hundreds of oral testimonies, primary and secondary documents, and academic literature. They also visited local archives in the area our game takes place that provided us with tons of documents and photographs. The rare historical footage comes from the Czech National Film Archive.

Q: Czechoslovak history is not a usual topic in history classes and textbooks⁷ for



⁷ The German annexation preceding WWII and the Prague Spring are possibly the only times most people hear about the country's history in more detail.

most people out there. Do you hope your players will learn something by playing *Svoboda 1945*?

A: The story we're telling might sound particular, but I believe it isn't. For starters, other states have similar experiences. But more importantly, it's a general story. The questions about justice, about how to live after the horrors of war, how to reconcile with your family history... there are larger things at play. So yes, you will learn things about specifically Czechoslovak and central European situation, but also a lot about human nature generally. And a space to reflect on all that.

Q: So, if you pick the interest of a player about this historical period, could you recommend them some references about it? (Books, documentaries, articles, etc.)

A: Talking about books, Benjamin Frommer's *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* is probably a good start for English speaking players, as well as Kevin McDermott's *Communist Czechoslovakia 1945-89: A Political and Social History*. For movies, I highly recommend *Adelheid*, a František Vlácil's masterpiece about the relationship between a Czech man and a German woman in post-war Czechoslovakia, and *All My Compatriots*, a legendary 1968 film directed by Vo-

jtěch Jasný about a small village torn by the communist collectivisation.

Q: Is there any takeaway message you'd like the players to get from *Svoboda 1945*?

A: History often seems like something distant and given, yet it is our everyday decisions that create it. The decisions we make now can haunt us for decades. Peace and democracy are fragile and can't be taken for granted. *Svoboda 1945* ends right after the establishment of a totalitarian regime that lasted for decades. We should be wary of how easily we can lose freedom when it looks like it's regained for good.

ABOUT THE TEAM

Charles Games is the studio behind the award-winning game *Attentat 1942*. It consists of scholars and students from Charles University as well as independent artists. They focus on narrative games in unique settings and enjoy coming up with innovative ways to explore serious themes. They're based in Prague and are currently developing a new historical game *Svoboda 1945*, in collaboration with historians from the Czech Academy of Sciences.

Dr. **Vít Šisler** is a lead game designer of *Attentat 1942* and *Svoboda 1945*. He is a founding member of Charles Games and an assistant professor of new media studies at Charles University.