

Conference Report: **Home Computer Subcultures and Society Before the Internet Age**, Zurich, March 24-25, 2017

Report: Ksenia Tatarchenko, University of Geneva

Today it is commonplace to speak of the radical transformation wrought by the Digital Age, but the precise nature of that change remains elusive. The conference tackles with this challenging question and highlights the historical moment when the computer first became an affordable commodity, focusing on home computer subcultures before the global spread of the Internet. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the individual possession of or access to home computers facilitated the diffusion of new computing practices. Generally known as “crackers” and “hackers”, new user groups arose that transcended the established boundaries between social and technical, political and economic, private and public. Users tinkered with their machines and software. They assumed new identities, often simultaneously transgressive and deeply integrated with corporate and establishment cultures. In other words, home computer subcultures were part of their societies and are a key site for questioning the entanglement of technical with political and for explaining the paradoxes that come with today’s global use of information technologies.¹

The two-day-long conference brought together an international group of scholars and was a forum for many lively conversations. Its core finding was that if we want to learn how computing “goes global” we first have to figure out how it is domesticated. As up-and-coming research area, the study of home computer cultures raises numerous provocative issues that were discussed at length across the panels. One particular methodological issue when working with a very recent past is the need to maintain critical distance to the object of study. Preservation of artifacts connected to gaming and cracking practices, use of ethnographic and sociological observations, and participant-to-observer trajectories (that is the status of tacit knowledge among the cracking community members who became scholars of the subject) were debated following the talks given by **CANAN HASTIK** (Technical University of Darmstadt), **MARKKU REUNANEN** (Aalto University), **BEATRICE TOBLER** (Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg) and the screening of “The 8-Bit Philosophy 2 – The Good and

¹ For a classical work revising the American mythology of counterculture and personal computing, see Turner, Fred, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago 2006. A pioneering volume on the European experience with personal computing is Alberts, Gerard and Oldenziel, Ruth (eds.), *Hacking Europe: From Computer Cultures to Demoscenes*, New York 2014.

the Bad Guys” directed by **KONSTANTIN STÜRZ**.

For a field saturated with mythologized narratives, the popular fascination with retro technologies and actor activism can be both a blessing and a curse. When reconstructing home computer practices, the answers to the deceptively simple questions of “who”, “when”, and “where”, reveal the complexity of the phenomena under study. **KEVIN DRISCOLL** (University of Virginia) showed that demographic analysis of users of the dial-up Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in the United States of the 1980s and 1990s contributes to correlating and solving two important research problems. On the one hand, such an analysis allows for arguments of scale, namely that the national reach of BBS was comparable to that of the ARPANET, celebrated as the Internet’s technological progenitor. On the other hand, it helps understand the mechanisms shaping past local online communities, the same mechanisms also being at work in contemporary social media. Similarly, the generational make-up of the BBS users in Finland, studied by **PETRI SAARIKOSKI** (University of Turku), and the demographic data on workers of the Swedish game industry analyzed by **ULF SANDQVIST** (Umeå University), highlighted the interplay between the pace of technical and social changes.

Representing about a dozen of national cases and extending across the Atlantic and the Iron Curtain, the impressive geographical coverage of the conference papers was not accidental. No less than two sessions focused on the geography of home computer subcultures, in which participants discussed the differences and interactions between the American center and the European periphery, and between the capitalist and socialist worlds. In particular, the papers contributed by **JULIA ERDOGAN** (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam) and **GLEB J. ALBERT** (University of Zurich/Zentrum Geschichte des Wissens) demonstrated that while code could cross political boundaries with a relative ease, the moral and economic values, as well as legal regimes associated with technical practices, had strong local influences. Moreover, their papers emphasized that radical political change, such as experienced in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, cannot be reduced to a narrative of rupture. Important continuities span technical expertise and come to light when analyzed from transnational and comparative perspectives.

Multiple contributions emphasized different institutional frames shaping the localized experiences of computerization: **DANIELA ZETTI** (ETH Zurich) situated the work of the renowned Swiss computer scientist, Niklaus Wirth, at the intersection of academic and industrial practices; **PATRYK WASIAK** (University of Wrocław) showed how Western

branding strategies shaped Polish user communities; and contributions by **THODORE LEKKAS** and **ARISTOTLE TYMPAS** (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) and by **MATTHIAS RÖHR** (Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg) highlighted the tensions between state policy and private initiatives in the Greek and German contexts, respectively. But the local dimension does not belong to mere context: it was integral to the very character of creativity and imaginary associated with home computing subcultures.

Spatiality was the key analytical tool of **NICK MONTFORT** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and **JAROSLAV ŠVELCH** (Charles University in Prague). Asking about the meanings of “Bringing the home into the computer”, Montfort used the American mass media representations of home computers to emphasize the transformation of the machine as related to work and hobby, to space and design, to greater autonomy and new forms of dependency. Švelch engaged with theoretical insights from micro-history and “Alltagsgeschichte”, and introduced the notion of “hyperlocal” to analyze the gaming artifacts created in late Socialist Czechoslovakia as a form of self-expression. His study of “hyperlocal games” offered insights into the experiences of Socialist youths and a better understanding of society under a regime on the verge of disappearance. Both Montfort and Švelch demonstrated how the study of the ordinary overrides the mythologies of digital utopianism.

The opening and closing notes by **JÜRGEN DANYEL** (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam) and **MONIKA DOMMANN** (University of Zurich) raised important questions of about how these home computer subcultures relate to broader issues of late 20th century historiography and Science, Technology, and Society (STS) scholarship. “How do hackers age?” and “Why hackers wear T-Shirts?”, asked Danyel and Dommann. These questions were more than a simple curiosity. Rather, they were serious invitations to engage with the aims and methods of Contemporary History and STS, to think of computerization as a social process and connect it to major trends of the 1980s, such as lifestyle and consumer behavior, work and leisure, individualism and activism. Ranging from identity formation, to gendering of technology, to social hierarchies among user groups, to Asian production and distribution of microelectronics, there were many more questions asked than could be answered within the limits of a single event. Such productive dialogue showcases a thriving research agenda and reflects the richness and promises of a field with many avenues yet to be explored.

Program:

Thomas Hengartner, Director Collegium Helveticum: Welcome address

Gleb J. Albert, Julia Erdogan, Markku Reunanen: Introduction

Jürgen Danyel, Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam: Subcultures of the Digital Age. Mythbuilding, Selfunderstanding and Social Impact

The State of Research

Nick Montfort, Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Bringing the Home into the Computer

Markku Reunanen, Aalto University: Demo and Cracker Studies: Who, What, Where and How?

Canan Hastik, Technical University of Darmstadt: DEMOAGE. Towards Multidisciplinary Collaborative Digital Humanities Research

Subcultures Beyond the Cold-War Divide

Gleb J. Albert, University of Zurich/Zentrum Geschichte des Wissens: Freaks, Pirates and New Markets. The Cracking Scene and Software Piracy in Developing Economies (Late 1980s to Early 1990s)

Julia Erdogan, Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam: Divided Cultures? Hackers in East and West Germany

Dial-Up Cultures: Online Sociability Before the Internet

Kevin Driscoll, University of Virginia: Who's Online? A Demography of Bulletin Board Systems in North America

Matthias Röhr, Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg: Between DBP and BBS. The West German BBS Scene, the Bundespost and the Struggle about Modems

Petri Saarikoski, University of Turku: Early History of BBS Culture in Finland, 1982-2000

Beatrice Tobler, Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg: Mailbox Worlds. Looking Back at the Swiss Mailbox Scene of the 1990s

Film Screening “The 8-Bit Philosophy 2 – The Good and the Bad Guys” (2017, first showing) and Q&A with director Konstantin Stürz

Peripheries? Computer Subcultures Beyond the “West”

Theodore Lekkas & Aristotle Tympas, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens: The Utopian Eighties of the Home Computer: Subcultural Communities Redefining Computing Technology. The Greek Experience

Jaroslav Švelch, Charles University in Prague: Making Games Ordinary. Studying Hobby Computer Cultures and “Hyperlocal” Games in 1980s-1990s Czechoslovakia

Subcultures, Technical Innovation and Computer Industries

Daniela Zetti, ETH Zurich: “A Sizeable, Technical Project” 1978-80. Niklaus Wirth’s Lilith Workstation as a Tool for Software Engineering

Patryk Wasiak, University of Wrocław: The Polish Amiga Scene: Computer Brand Community in Transitional Economy

Ulf Sandqvist, Umeå University: The Game Industry and the Demoscene. A Short Review of the History, Archives and Research Methods from a Swedish Perspective

Final Discussion

Monika Dommann, University of Zurich: Introductory Comment