

Textual Demoscene

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Abstract

The demoscene is a mainly European subculture of computer programmers, whose programs generate computer art in real time. The aim of this report is to attempt a description of the textual dimension of the demoscene. The report is the effect of efforts to perform an ethnographic exploration of the Polish computer scene; it quotes interviews with participants of demo parties, where text plays a significant role: in demos, real-time texts, IF, mags or digital adaptations. Media archeology focusing on the textual aspect of the demoscene is important to understanding the beginnings of digital literature and genres of digital-born texts.

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Does the demoscene have anything in common with literature? Did text play an important role in demoscene creations? Can the products of the demoscene be of interests to historians of electronic literature? The search for answers to such questions was the point of departure for the research described in this report.

My work consisted first and foremost of reaching demoscene creators, with the aim of discussing the phenomenon, types of text uses, as well as analyzing the products of the demoscene. I limited my contacts to persons from Poland, where the demoscene was (and still is) very well developed. I treat the Polish example as a case study among other national scenes. Limiting research to one language community implies focusing on a choice of platforms popular in the given geographical region. This ethnographic methodology seems appropriate, given the small body of literature on demoscene, as well as the limited popularity of this phenomenon as a study subject among researchers in the field of digital literature or broader digital media. Part of the results of the research carried out for this report was presented at the Electronic Literature Organization Conference “Hold the Light” in Milwaukee (2014), where I discussed the beginnings of digital literature in Poland. During that conference a textual VIC-20 demo, *Nanowatt*, by nom de nom, McMartin, and Baud1 (otherwise known as Nick Montfort, Michael C. Martin, and Patsy Baudoin), was also presented, which is worth mentioning, since it was the first instance of a demoscene work being screened at this most important annual event devoted to electronic literature.

Another starting point for my research was an attempt at answering the question whether demoscene, as a digital media phenomenon, can be treated as a precursor for other types of digital literature, already noticed and described by the academia, and divided by N. Katherine Hayles into two generations; the first generation based mainly on hypertext and the StorySpace school, and the second generation, involving authors who publish online. The phenomenon of the demoscene, seldom described in American scholarship, developed before these two formations distinguished by Hayles.

Fight Club

The ethnographic method for exploring the demoscene circles seems most appropriate also given the character of the phenomenon. Piotr Czerski, the author of the report „Maszyny, które mogą wszystko” [“Machines that Can Do Everything”] underlines the anarchical dimension of the organization of the computer scene, comparing it to “Fight Club” in the movie of the same name, a secret underground organization. (The creators of the opening titles in Fincher’s film drew inspiration from demoscene works.) The demoscene was a predominantly European phenomenon (including Middle and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia); it developed also on other continents, albeit later and on a smaller scale. One of the explanations as to why the scene flourished in the former Soviet bloc was the inaccessibility of legal software, which led to the advent of crackers – persons distributing illegal programs with cracked, or removed, copy-protection. The difficulty of access to software led to an enhanced awareness of software and programming, an education of sorts, often equaling or surpassing that of professionals, acquired by the crackers at a very young age. Often the crackers would include their textual signatures (nicks) in the cracked program. As Czerski points out:

These notes intertwined into the original code were also the greatest reward for the cracker – they allowed for the viral distribution of their signature inside the programs – marking the work with their unique pseudonym and the name of the group they belonged to, an

anarchic organization, collaborating to acquire new software and exchange experience gathered while cracking the programs. (p. 15)

The distribution of illegal software is also connected with the phenomenon of the exchange market (pl. giełda), a place where wares such as pirated video tapes, cassettes, floppy discs etc. were traded.

According to one of the few publications devoted to this phenomenon: “The demoscene is a phenomenon unique to the European computer arts sub-culture, which specializes in producing demos - audio-visual presentations created in real time. It is a culture created by the first generation of kids who grew up with home computers and computer games in the 1980s.” (Tasajärvi, 2004: cover text)

When discussing the popularity and success of the demoscene, Czerski focuses on four aspects that were characteristic of this underground organization:

- demosceners trying to impress the audience during the party
- disinterested enthusiasm and passion as emotions bonding the community
- demosceners creating their own channels for distribution, and thus making the demoscene works available within those involved in the scene
- a low entry threshold (the only gesture of initiation: adopting a pseudonym)

The places for meetings and presentation of the demos were parties, examples of creative collaborative activity in the digital field, unique on a world scale. The gatherings had also an important socializing role:

For the members of the demoscene, the parties were both the Olympics and the carnival, a time of contest and festivities, meeting face to face with people they had hitherto known only online, socializing, never-ending conversations about the scene and computers in general, frantically wrapping up demos, finally, Dionysian alcohol consumption.
(p.19)

Aside the parties, the networked social structure of the demoscene also played an immense role. When discussing the textual aspects of demoscene culture, it must be underlined that we are not searching for literary genres recognized by the academia and described and evaluated by the traditional actors of the literary field. Even if we look for traces of conventional literary qualities, we should have in mind that the members of the demoscene were not seeking to bring their creations to the typical actors of the literary field – publishers, reviewers, critics; the demoscene created its own environment for the both the presentation and distribution of works. Moreover, importantly, it worked out its own special aesthetics. Not only the most popular demos, the flagship projects of the demoscene should be analyzed within these categories, but so should be other literary works that came about as part of the demoscene: text games, real-time text, poetry generators demo, zines, and digital adaptations of short-story collections. Texts were distributed during parties, in electronic zines, and on cassette tapes. When presenting a review of demoscene genres, it should be underlined that within the field of digital media, text is but one of the aspects of the work, and is seldom even considered an important one.

Demos

Very often in the literature devoted to the computer scene it is remarked that the aim of the

demoscene is to show off visual programming abilities. This was the main purpose of demos – originally, a “demo” was a program that would demonstrate the possibilities of the machine (and only later of the programmer). Most demos are treated like music videos, but in a few cases very unusual productions have appeared, often using text; these might well qualify as literary works. (In the late 1980s and early 1990s in particular, many works were created in Polish). Piotr Czerski explains the concept of a demo as follows:

In the most general definition, a demo is a noninteractive computer program (it does not allow the participation of the user, who remains a passive viewer) that generates an audiovisual structure in the form of an animation with sound. Such a definition of the demo underlines the key traits of demos, distinguishing them from forms like games, music videos, or animations created with 3D modeling tools: the demo is a real time program, the key effects of which are generated during its execution by a processor carrying out predefined computation and acting according to algorithms that combine and process relatively simple input. (p. 16)

Although in Czerski’s definition he stresses lack of interactivity, a substantial part of the text published in scrolls aims at establishing contact with the user, often in a very vulgar and aggressive way. It has to be kept in mind that the authors were teenagers, computer geeks, “illegal boys,” always hiding behind pseudonyms, and the audience constituted of party participants. The creators of demos express friendly attitudes towards those they respect and admire through “greetings” (Pol.: *greetzy*), but also insult their enemies, the authors of boring demos, and girls who broke up with the programmers. One of the text-based Polish demos, *Logic V* (1991), signed by Wojtuś, involves ironic insults directed at the user for downloading the program illegally and disregarding copyrights.

Demos can be divided into old-school and new-school ones. From the textual perspective, the old school demos are more interesting, since they are often based on scroll-text, which moves up and down the screen. The scrolls could also contain brief stories or real-time transcriptions of drinking parties occurring “live,” while the demo was being created (Ethanol Soft Inc., *Hooy-Program*) - thus the scrolls were often written by many people.

An interesting example of scroll-text is authored by Kaz, who created the ZX-demo *Kaz 5* in 1990. This demo can be regarded as a short story, flash fiction or a narrative poem. It involves a monotonous display of the hovering logo of the author paired with playful text running underneath the logo. The creator of the poem writes about the speed and rhythm of the text, as well as its position. In some parts of the demo, the text scrolls deliberately sluggishly, allowing the viewer to read it several times (in this fragment the author explains that this is the fastest possible speed of presentation). But sometimes the text speeds up dramatically and undulates on the screen, making reading almost impossible. The speed of the text is always commented and explained by the author. Yerzmyey concludes: “it is a kind of short story about the author's imaginary struggles with the computer and his attempts to rein it in, as illustrated by the strange behavior of the scroll, allegedly caused by the computer. :).”(p. 61).



A screen from Kaz's text demo

Another kind of demo interesting from the perspective of digital literature is *Turbo Wieszcz* [Turbo Prophet] written collaboratively by Jakub Noniewicz and Grych, based in part on a program published in the magazine *Amiga* in a text by its editor in chief, Marek Pampuch titled “Jak dostać Nobla?” Pampuch suggested a choice of rhyming sentences or maxims, deliberately rather cheesy and tacky, apocalyptic and catastrophic in content, aiming at an imitation of the most renowned Polish romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Pampuch’s memes were appropriated by a group of young programmers, members of the demoscene, who turned this generator of rhymes into a generator outputting bad poems, decorated with falling skulls and outfitted with sound. Although the authors did not demonstrate Turbo Prophet at parties, it was distributed among other programmers, students and friends from the scene. The program was written in seven hours, and later more strophes were added by Freak, Monster and probably Fred.

The output was randomly generated from sentences like:

```
data := 'Czy na te zbrodnie nie będzie kary?';  
data := 'Opustoszały bagna, moczary';  
data := 'Na nic się modły zdadzą ni czary';  
data := 'Z krwi mordowanych sączą puchary';  
data := 'Już na arenę krew tryska!';  
data := 'Już piana cieknie im z pyska!';  
data := 'Już hen w oddali gdzieś błyska!';  
data := 'Śmierć w kącie czai się bliska!';  
data := 'Niesamowite duchów igrzyska!';
```

The demo by Jakub Noniewicz, Freak and Grych written in the years 1992-1995 was later ported for Android and Windows.

Another separate category are demos consisting of texts is a kind of poem. Among the sceners this

type of work is called scene poetry. The demo *Bumbum* [Boomboom] by Tate from 1997 is a type of involved statement on the newest historical events in the history of Poland, where scenes recognizable to most Poles are mixed with computer graphics and words edited according to the rhythm of the music.

Real-Time Text

Another phenomenon is real-time text, created as a kind of party blog. A specially set-up computer with a text editor engaged was present during a party. As Yerzmyey states: “During the whole get-together, all the participants could write on the computer whatever came to mind. This sort of piece was then later published, after the party, or in the form of an ordinary TXT file, or in a much more decorative form, fitted with a code and music (sometimes there are also graphics or photos from the party). It is more stream of consciousness than a report as such.” (p. 62) Real-time texts are a testament to the particular sense of humor of the demosceners and their fondness of vulgar language. During the party *Grzybsoniada 2011* the participants ironically compete and encourage others to participate:

Ladies and Gentlemen, listen up... We have to write a couple kilo of text for Grzybson, so he has something to code in real time ;) Buckle up and let's write... You shouldn't begin a sentence with “so”, so we are off to write some text. Nobody will be reading this anyway.”
From 2009 we have accounts of a satisfactory party: “it's around one am. realtime is going to sleep. even twelve past one, as dotcotr fuuuuuu... ing mikey informs me :P” From the realtime record we learn about the type of stimulants used: “our organization has (not) got pissed on karmi [beer brand marketed to women];)

In a file from 2010 swear words are composed into graphics, or maybe a sort of concrete poetry. This image is then commented during several minutes of text.

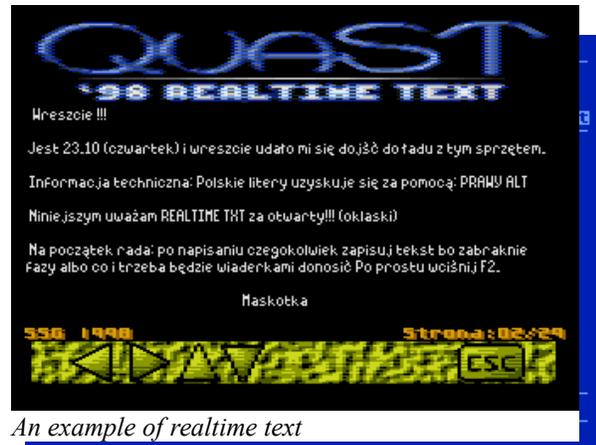
```
cccccc h  h u  ujjjjj
c   h  h u  u  j
c   hhhhhh u  u  j
c   h  h u  u j  j
cccccc h  h uuuuu jjjj
           no copy
```

Real-time texts are characterized by spontaneity, lack of concern for language correctness, obscenities.



An example of realtime text

An example of realtime text from *Grzybsoniada*



An example of realtime text

An example of realtime text

Text Games

Given the role of declination and conjugation in the Polish language, interactive fiction did not develop in Poland to the extent it did in countries with less inflected languages. Professional IF were published in Poland by production studios. Among their best known productions there are works like *Mózgprocesor* [*Brain Processor*] (1989) by Computer Adventure Studio. There were also some independent productions, inspired by the esthetics of the demoscene, which are characteristic of the phenomenon. A group specializing in text games in the esthetics of bad taste, trash, camp and obscenity was the team Hooy-Program. An example of their work is the game *Smok* [*Dragon*] (1993) by Hooy-Program, which is based mainly on humor, allowing to avoid Polish diacritics. The character holding a sword has the choice to either “kopnosc smoka w jajca” [“kick the dragon in the balls”; distorted spelling] (N) or “jeszcze raz zaatakowac go mieczem” [once again attack him with the sword] (O) !!! The unparalleled symbol of demoscene esthetics applied to IF is the game for ZX-Spectrum, *Droga do Duplandu* [*The Road to Assland*], developed in the 1990s, but only published in 2003. The game is a parody of the fantasy genre, and it begins as follows:

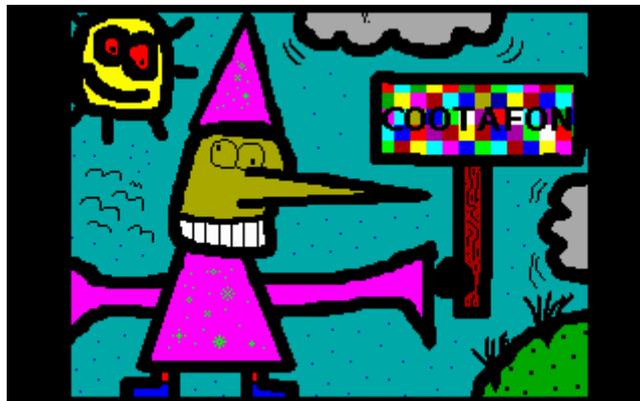
Once upon a time, beyond seven dicks, and seven cunts, and one small, albeit hideously smelly ass, there was a foreign land. It was an unparalleled SHITHOLE, dogs there barked with their ASSES, and birds flied ASSWAYS. Even the name of this land sucked ASS, for it was called ASSLAND.



A screen from Smok



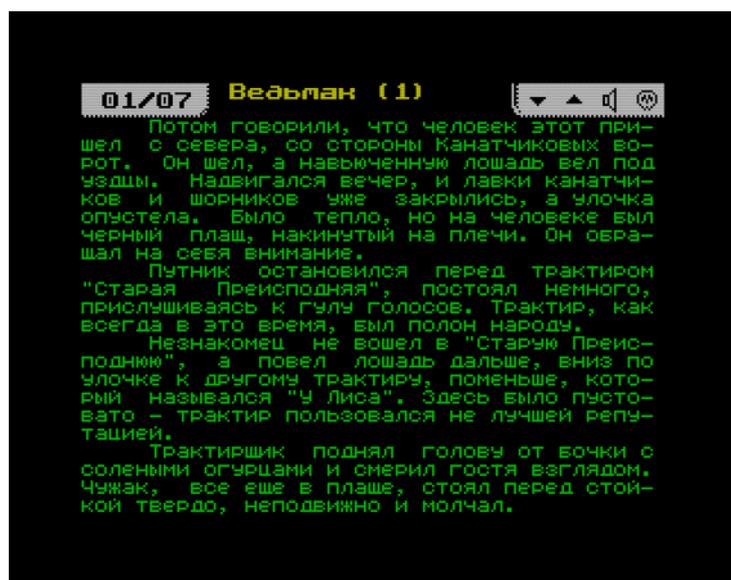
A screen from Droga do Duplandu



A screen from Droga do Duplandu

Books/short stories in electronic form

The demosceners also digitalized traditional texts and created digital adaptations. Collections of short stories and mini-novels have been released electronically (sometimes digital books contain some visual illustration, code, music, screen saver). One of the best known digital adaptations is that of the prose of the Polish celebrated fantasy writer, Andrzej Sapkowski, whose *Wiedźmin* [Witcher] was digitalized for the scene by the Russian scener Eye-Q. The book contains a code (of course), music, and even a screen saver.



The Witcher in the Russian digital adaptation

Mags

Apart from the parties, the scene could not exist without the network of demosceners mailing floppy discs or cassettes with their productions. Hence, as important as competition was for the scene, it also required friendship, sharing, help, fostering good atmosphere. Mags were computer scene magazines distributed on disks or cassettes, containing programs, graphics, music, short stories, and poems. Examples of Polish zines are *ZX-Land* and *Hooy*.



ZX LAND mag

The final observation, stemming from the sole fact that an MIT researcher contacted demosceners, is the feeling of surprise expressed by the demosceners that someone from outside this rather closed structure could be interested in the phenomenon. As Yerzmyey, a veteran of the Polish scene, observed: “the propensity of obscenities and somewhat hermetic sense of humor are perceived as rather freakish.” Another informer, writing about the demoscene, was sure that this “phenomenon” (as he doubtfully put it in inverted commas) can be subject to analysis and exploration; although he was deeply doubtful that there were researchers actually interested. Yet another demoscener was skeptic that anything from the demoscene could enter into the history of media culture. After a meeting with one of the demosceners they wrote to me an email that they felt “embarrassed for wasting your precious time on me and my boring babble.” This approach is one of the main reasons for the demoscene and its pioneer character still remaining unacknowledged even by open-minded researchers in the field.

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