

The Polish demoscene – between the past and the future.

Conversation with Łukasz Szalankiewicz

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In 2021, the National Institute of Cultural Heritage approved the application to include the demoscene in the UNESCO National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Social Committee of the Polish Demoscene Chronicles was responsible for coordinating these activities. The organization aims to document and analyse traditions related to the domestic demoscene. The conversation between Marcin Pigulak (historian of digital games) and Łukasz Szalankiewicz (lecturer, multimedia artist and representative of the Polish Demoscene Chronicles) focuses on the history of the Polish demoscene, its specific nature compared to other digital cultures and contemporary strategies to preserve its heritage.

KEYWORDS: demoscene, demo, demoparty, digital culture, digital heritage

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and representative of the Social Committee
of the Polish Demoscene Chronicles.
Interviewed by Marcin Pigulak

Do you remember when you first sat down in front of a computer?

Computers first came into my life in 1989, when I was aged eleven. Before that, I knew games from arcade machines, of course. At the time, I was living in Sanok in the Podkarpackie region. In hindsight, it was a rather provincial region on Poland’s fringes, so new things didn’t arrive as quickly as in the larger conurbations. My cousins, who owned an 8-bit Atari computer, used to invite me “to play games”. I would usually either sit and watch them play or take turns playing with them. I remember that the first game was *River Raid*. It wasn’t until the early 1990s that I came into contact with 16-bit computers and the first PCs from Optimus.

So how did you come into contact with the demoscene?

By playing the games, well, actually by getting inside them, into their structure. Out of curiosity, I started checking the extra files on the floppy disks, reading about copying and all the basic processes. Although there was copyright law, until 1994 there were no laws that

actually regulated the circulation of software – piracy was booming, so we rarely had the opportunity to play a game on the original disc. On such a floppy I found a couple of extra files that were completely different to the manufacturer's, and among them a crack intro [information about breaking the game's copy protection – M.P.]. Futuristic, let's call it cyberpunk, music was accompanied by dynamic colours and sinuous graphics composed of ASCII characters. I was fascinated but did not fully understand the essence of these productions. Even friends who had owned computers longer and come across them in almost every game thought they were just extra credits.

Then some friends came along with an Amiga, the dominant computer on the Polish market in the early 1990s. I saw two demos at the time: *State of the Art* by the Scandinavian group Spaceballs and *Technological Death* by Mad Elks.[1] These were something like stand-alone music videos on two and one floppy disks. I soon noticed the same pattern: dominant music, greetings for other groups, logos and the use of ASCII. Some time later, a friend showed me a disk magazine called "Kebab", and I saw something that really surprised me: a kind of interactive publication on a floppy disk in Polish, with graphics and music. After that I came across similar magazines that described all these demoscene dependencies, but also had their own sections devoted strictly to programming, music and games (although there were fewer and fewer of these as the demoscene developed); so this was a space for almost anyone interested in digital culture. Then it became clear that there were many more of these productions for every computer platform.

It was in 1993 that I decided to get into this movement. Since other platforms – including Atari, Commodore, Amiga – already had an established community, I picked PCs. Though the first attempts to organise around this platform date back to 1992, it was in 1993 that people from various Polish cities began to create a fully-fledged PC scene. The demoscene magazine *Bad News* became an important point of contact (and address database) for us.

How did the Polish demoscene evolve?

We didn't actually use the word 'demoscene'; it was simply a 'scene'. It was made up of a conglomeration of platforms that had their own specificities and operated on the basis of healthy competition. I'm using the term 'demoscene' in the colloquial sense, but at the time 'scene' meant pretty much the same as 'community'. There was a kind of subcultural approach to it, a reference to groups known for music, for example. This also true of the specific, somewhat subversive understanding of digital

[1] These demonstrations debuted in 1992 and 1993, respectively.

art – different to that used by the critics, free of aesthetic canons and mainstream restrictions of ‘whether it’s appropriate’.

From the historical point of view, the first activities on the national demoscene are related to such people as the hacker Chris, and the games that he hacked on the ZX Spectrum. He placed his demos next to games or presented them in the community. Thus, the first forms of demonstrations were simple scrolls or music disks.[2] Based on source research, I’ve traced the beginnings of these activities back to 1987. However, the first groups creating a computer demoscene were formed in 1988. These include Quartet on the Commodore 64, which serves as a model group – moving away from game-breaking practices to artistic activities. By this time, other line-ups were already forming, but it was Quartet that started making demos, publishing magazines or organising the first estate parties. The fruit of their work includes “Kebab” magazine, which I mentioned earlier.

Ultimately, platforms are still the basis for discussing the demoscene’s output. We mainly had ZX Spectrum, Atari, Commodore/Amiga and PCs. We didn’t have an Amstrad scene because that platform didn’t catch on in Poland. Another division is based on the difference between 8-bit and 16-bit computers for some of the brands I’ve mentioned. The 32-bit Atari Falcon, for example, did appear, but it was a bit of a lost child. For a while there was a craze for things like GameBoy, but the scene didn’t develop and actually wasn’t fully defined. Unfortunately, I’m not an expert on the console scene (because there is one in existence), but the impact of their activities on the Polish demoscene is not great.

As the Social Committee of the Polish Demoscene Chronicles, you see the demoscene as being the first and most important digital culture in the country. What aspects of it do you consider the most important?

The first thing to do is to define Polish gamedev in the 1980s and 1990s – not so much through the prism of games, but through the people who made them. Demoscene players had digital competences – the ability to programme, create, etc. This made them the natural progenitors of Poland’s emergent computerisation. They understood the intricacies of IT and were among the few who knew how to do something in an assembler, and how to solve certain programming problems in a practical and innovative way. With limited documentation and no internet, these were key skills. The more artistically gifted among them ended up in the development studios that were appearing at the time, raising the overall level of Polish games. The scene also gave us many musicians and graphic designers who are still active in their professions today.

[2] Music disks are seen by the ZX Spectrum community as demos. Although they do not meet the classic

definition of a demo, they are considered the first such examples on Polish soil.

We can talk about the demoscene in terms of disseminating digital creations: graphics or music modules (functioning as add-ons on floppy disks and CDs, preceding the MP3 format). Some members of the demoscene tried their hand at writing viruses, which were more funny than malicious, testing the capabilities of the security measures at that time (to the benefit of the knowledge of system owners).

The demoscene started out as a youth subculture but has evolved into an alternative culture as its members have grown up. This is material for an academic discussion on whether the demoscene is a subculture or not; in my opinion, it is an alternative culture, but with more of a countercultural bent. In the case of the demoscene, one very important determinant was having its own language – a very specific one, with its own dynamics, similar in spirit to communication within hacker or cracker groups. On Polish soil, it served as a prototype of emoticons. Transferred over time to IRC channels (the first social chat rooms) and student forums, they then permeated a wider group of digital users.

It's commonly held that the essence of the demoscene remains its symbol: demo. The dictionary version describes this acronym as 'a demo version of a computer programme'. Doesn't that exhaust the specifics of the term from your perspective?

It is a type of programme designed to demonstrate the capabilities of a particular computer platform – or rather to transcend the apparent system-software barrier of that platform. Something is created that theoretically shouldn't be possible, something that the hardware developers did not predict. From the perspective of the 1980s and 1990s, it was important to explore the technology as much as possible, but the central idea was to cross barriers. Computer demonstrations – seen as productions or texts of digital culture – symbolised such practices.

Bearing in mind the formal or content specificity of demos, can we produce a typology of them?

It's clear that each and every platform had a different approach to their activity. Earlier I mentioned music disks on the ZX Spectrum; although they don't formally perform the functions identified with demos, they are seen as such by the community. Another issue relates to length. Demos that were long and demonstrated coding capabilities based on a number of different effects are itemised as megademos. At the same time, there was already 'competition' for them in the form of shorter demonstrations, which we call intros [intro; a presentation of a computer's capabilities – note M.P.]. Their standard volume became 64 kilobytes, and in these 64 kilobytes you had to include everything, including graphics and music. In fact, there were special competitions

in this area. This was an extra challenge for those who made standard demos. This ‘challenge’ aspect of the demoscene concerned smaller and smaller values over time – 4 kilobytes and now even 256 bytes.

You mentioned the subcultural nature of the demoscene. Is social or political engagement characteristic of this community, for example?

Demoscene creative work rarely contains a clearly defined message. You usually don’t find a commentary that could convey the creators’ worldview. It was originally intended as an audiovisual presentation that could be liked or disliked, and which an individual might have a better or worse understanding of. To outsiders, it looked like a music video or animation.

However, there are groups that are able to communicate specific content. This usually manifests itself through the use of a particular style that guarantees recognition. There are also attempts to prove that the demo is ‘about something’ after all. Yet these attempts at committed creativity are relatively rare. Where the main effort is put into transcending technical limitations, the story is added value. From the fairly recent stuff [2014 – note M.P.], I recommend the Lamers group’s *Cyberpunk* demo on Atari or the Samar group on C64 about magic mushrooms (*Amanita*, 2022). On the PC, on the other hand, there was the group Hypnotize, which in the 1990s dealt with topics such as schizophrenia, epilepsy or claustrophobia.

Which Polish demos from the 1990s – the heyday of the trend – enjoyed the greatest success on the international stage?

So far, demoscene fans have referred to the Mad Elks’ *Technological Death* [1993 – note M.P.]; it was a demo for the Amiga, which contained all the most popular solutions of the time, and which stood out from other Polish demos. The second such title was *The Asskicker*, which came out for the 8-bit Atari (1996). What caused a shock was the generation of graphics and transitions, previously used in the game *Doom*. Another example of a group that was popular internationally is Pulse from Wrocław (PC), which co-operated with Western formations and won international events. Paradoxically, some set-ups had to wait a little longer for their heyday. The Commodore 64 scene, which hibernated a little in the late 1990s, has revived in recent years. It now enjoys widespread international recognition.

As a rule, the home-grown demoscene followed the models operating in other countries, which was down to their universality. Otherwise, the products of the Polish demoscene would not have appeared on the world stage either. “Polishness” in the content of demos was mostly expressed in accents: musical references, vocals in Polish, graphic quotations, etc.

The demoparty is considered to be the beating heart of the scene. Can research into its participants and the content it generated expand the picture of 1990s Polish digital culture?

Sure. We can see the origins of such meetings right at the dawn of the national scene, back in 1986. Originally, these were gatherings of people interested in a particular platform; you could argue that this was where they watched the first western demos or intros. In line with the trend at the time, the first parties were called ‘*copyparties*’. They consisted of copying various types of software: games, application programmes, as well as demoscene products. In the West, the first parties of this type took the form of competitions combined with crack intro shows. The first successful Polish parties, with voting, results being announced etc., were the All Stars Party in Gdańsk (1990) and the more Amiga-like Luzers and Joker Team Copy-Party in Gdynia (1991). The first Polish PC party was organised in 1995 in Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski. Interestingly, parties in Poland didn’t just mean in big cities; they were also provincial centres. The venue was mainly determined by the authority of the organiser. This created interesting practices; in a world without the internet, demoscene people travelled around Poland, got to know each other, voted for the demos they saw, wrote reports for magazines and prepared for their next trips. A list of all the groups and parties is included in the Futuris group demo.[3]

From the point of view of the PC scene, for example, what did the ideal demoparty look like?

Every platform had its own events and rhythm for organising them. Generally, they lasted from one to several days, depending on the ‘processing capacity’ of the organiser. At first, the venues that were rented or shared were mainly schools.

The basis was having the right equipment: for example, a projector to which a computer was connected and a screen where demos were displayed. The party had to have its own dynamics to keep the participants occupied in some way. This also applied to social games like ‘Pepsi drinking competitions’ with floppy disk prizes. They introduced elements of party culture into the community. The most important thing happened late in the day, when competitions devoted to particular aspects (music, graphics) or formats (intros, demos) were run. The community’s response to the demos was checked by voting, with marks written on cards. The scores were counted by the organisers, and the results were announced the following morning. The winners occasionally received physical prizes (e.g. graphics cards), and more

[3] Biter [Archive], *ID Gene / Futuris [PC Demo | Xenium 2022]*, <https://youtube/H1PFVaE-HNE> (accessed: 10.01.2023).

often symbolic prizes in the form of a 'handshake from the chairman'. Today's demoparties somewhat ironically hark back to those days, with the winners being awarded a plastic statuette or a framed certificate.

Basically, the community does not modify the key elements of the demoparty because they are treated as parts of a universal, transnational digital demoscene culture. I suggest that the only element that distinguishes Polish demoparties from others is the spontaneity of participants and their openness to integration. A person who sees the demoscene through the prism of a culture of 'quiet geeks' could be very surprised.

Every golden age is usually followed by a crisis; the demoscene has also experienced such a bump.

The core of the demoscene is its community. You also have to be active in some way within it, positioning yourself, and the rivalry that plays out between groups is also important. A healthy rivalry, I might add (it's the only community that welcomes competitors in demos, even if the rival groups don't know each other). This competition – to be the best, to be appreciated – was defined by the disk magazines and charts sections. Users regularly voted by filling in files on floppy disks and sending them in. This made the demosceners aware of their importance on a local or international level. The magazines filled the community gaps between demoparties.

The decline in both activities can be seen as a litmus test of the vitality of the scene. Based on my research, I conclude that the complete collapse of demoscene initiatives took place between 2003 and 2007. I suspect that this is related to people who were previously active entering adulthood in the broadest sense: work, family, etc.

Let's remember that the demoscene was a niche creation. The last intake was in the early 21st century. The demoscene was essentially trying to be visible, but PR-wise it wrung its own neck through its hermeticity; considering itself an elitist form of digital culture, operating in a language that was incomprehensible to outsiders. All of this meant that the latest 'intake' had to be given time to implement and start creating unique things, while the advanced ones got their lives in order. The problem now is that there are few candidates from today's young generation.

When did part of the community decide to become 'curators of memory' and set up the Social Committee of the Polish Demoscene Chronicles?

It was born spontaneously in the minds of a few people a few years ago. For my part, I had the need to understand all the demoscene relationships – its beginnings, definitions, etc. I asked myself: Why did I dedicate my life as a young person to this community? As the

administrator of the Facebook discussion group Demoscene PL, I started to simulate the group in this spirit: to establish the facts and nuances related to the activities of demoscene groups. Soon afterwards, together with Andrzej Lichnerowicz and Kaja Mikoszevska, we created a core in the form of the Chronicle of Polish Demoscene. We invited other people specialising in their fields to join us. Our goal was to officially get the Polish demoscene entered on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It took us two years to prepare the application, generate a favourable attitude from all demoscene platforms and carry out research (establishing the chronology, selecting demos). Interestingly, in keeping with the demoscene spirit, we held a vote in which the community selected representative demos. These were presented before a committee.

What arguments do you need to use to unite an environment renowned for its divisions?

Divisions used to be folklore and are now a memory of folklore. The modern demoscene is more multiplatform, and demoparties tend to 'mix' different platforms. So, in general, the idea was to select those people who bond these communities and ask for their support in reaching a consensus. We decided to bring the community together by finding partners, including the gaming press, research units or developers with a demoscene pedigree. We became too big to be negated or ignored by any possible malcontents. At the same time, we were open to opinions from the community coming through social media and Discord channels.

What was also important was the fact that as people known for their activities for the demoscene we operated under the auspices of a social committee – a grassroots initiative with no formal hierarchy and no interest in financial activities. I sometimes joke that our fundraising could at amount at most to initiatives like constructing a 'Floppy Disk Monument'.

The Committee's concept is based on things such as archiving, curatorial and popularisation activities. Which of these do you consider to be key?

Due to the nature of the Committee and its democratic way of governing, activities are spread out over time. We monitor what is happening in the demoscene and know where the largest concentrations of sources for a given platform are located. The challenge is to collect and group them, to get a space that would ensure the sustainability of media and digital storage. The Ministry [Ministry of Culture and National Heritage – note M.P.] has offered us such a space – free and accessible to all – in the Kronik@ portal. However, obtaining material from private individuals means adopting the appropriate strategy and taking into account the specific nature of the sources. So, we are at the

stage of working out the principles for cooperation with representatives of the demoscene and creating a collection that will not depend on the goodwill of individuals. In recent years, we have digitised a lot of demos on our own; most – especially PC productions – are on our YouTube channel.[4] What's more, we have selected the best demos from other platforms and ranked them by year. As for popularisation activities, we have created a timeline of the Polish demoscene[5] and prepared the basics of a demoscene dictionary.[6] We regularly participate in events related to the promotion of digital culture.

How do you see the purpose of fostering the memory of the demoscene's heritage when today's young people belong to a different digital culture?

The core of the today's demoscene are the '40 plus' people. I think that for at least a decade veterans will be effective in stimulating the memory of the demoscene. The second concept is to find a common language with young people by presenting the demoscene ethos when promoting modern programming tools; creating demos using modern engines (Unity, Unreal) or ShaderToy. There are special, dedicated events where young people compete to music in order to create an object for a specific slogan (say: 'elephant'). With the freedom of form, real-time design of creative work and professional commentary, such events are closer to an e-sports formula. Personally, this is where my hopes lie for the demoscene developing as an alternative culture – in a synergy of past and future.

Translated by Rob Pagett

Biter [Archive], *ID Gene / Futuris [PC Demo | Xenium 2022]*, <https://youtube.com/H1PFVaE-HNE> (accessed: 10.01.2023)
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 Kronika Polskiej Demosceny, *Słownik*, <https://kskpd.pl/slownik/> (accessed: 10.01.2023)

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[4] Kronika Polskiej Demosceny, <https://www.youtube.com/@KronikaPolskiejDemosceny/featured> (accessed: 10.01.2023).

[5] Kronika Polskiej Demosceny, *Linia czasu*, <https://kskpd.pl/timeline/> (accessed: 10.01.2023).

[6] Kronika Polskiej Demosceny, *Słownik*, <https://kskpd.pl/slownik/> (accessed: 10.01.2023).