game environments

Untitled. Illustration by Gabriel Alayza Moncloa.

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Report

Eastern European Courage through Game Art. The First Two Years of the Game Art Programme at University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest (2019–2021)

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Abstract

This case study aims to show that, for game use in education, it is not sufficient for transferred knowledge to simply become part of a *game*, but that personal experience is also necessary. Knowledge transfer needs a supporting context that help provide intrinsic motivations, as well as helping learners to have some sort of flow experience. All of this also relates to a secondary research objective presented in this report, which is to describe the inception and conceptual approach of the only Master's programme in Hungary, building on courses relating to video game design. These courses rests on two main pillars: the contemplation of social issues, and cooperation between students. Several unexpected events created the context for this case study: the sudden death in September 2019 at the launch of the MA course of László Rajk, who initiated the course; the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020; and then at the end of the semester a political decision that put in question the autonomy of the university, leaving students and teaching staff alike in an uncertain situation. All of these circumstances had a significant impact on teaching in the programme, as well as on our students' learning processes. In this contribution, we present the lived experience we acquired in this special situation and how this is closely related to the investigation of the extent to which personal experience shapes personal, intrinsic, motivation in game-oriented education.

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This report will provide insights into what it is like to create, and run, a Master's level programme under multi-facetted pressures. Due to political factors, the outbreak of a global pandemic, as well as the passing of a crucial faculty member, the nature of our programme not only became a curricular challenge, but a challenge of finding courage and comradery in teachers and students alike. To fully unpack this situation, we will look at specific details of courses and materials in the programme, but also the overall context surrounding the programme and how it affected our working processes and pedagogical environments.

The programme, consisting of two years of studies, started with courses intimately connected to the materials available at the Open Society Archive (OSA) in Budapest, which operates from the Central European University (CEU). OSA has a large collection of materials relating to the Cold War and the Human Rights situation in Central-Eastern Europe. In choosing this theme, we also wished to show our respects to László Rajk, who was a decisive figure in the Democratic Opposition that played a significant role in the change of political system in Hungary in 1989/90. Rajk also regarded reflection on social issues as especially important in his work as an artist and teacher, and this is something we wanted to embody as early in the programme as possible. In the second year, the situation changed even further. Students found themselves unexpectedly in a situation where they came face to face, not with historical sources on past events, but a situation in which they experienced personally what decisions and cooperative strategies are involved in the struggle for a matter of social justice. And they reacted creatively in their own, unique ways.

In the first part of this report, we examine the stated aims and methodology used on the Game Art and Design (GAD) courses starting off with a brief description of László Rajk's intellectual heritage. The second part of the report presents two games created

by our students and an interactive installation. We conclude by reviewing the relation between personal experience and personal motivation and examining the results of the two years that the course ran.

Eastern European Courage

Hungary – which was part of the so-called Eastern Bloc – made a long journey during the Cold War (for example, with its 1956 Uprising) before the declaration of a new republic as a result of the democratic transition in 1989. A significant role in the success of this process was played by the Democratic Opposition that appeared at the end of the 1960s and which protested the existing Socialist system through a variety of actions and the propagation of underground, samizdat, leaflets. One of the leading figures in this opposition movement was László Rajk, who in 2009 founded the Production Design MA course at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) in Budapest. Rajk, who was an architect by profession, encouraged in his pedagogical approach social awareness and tolerant thinking in his students, as well as the enabling of cooperation between those studying different subjects. The Game Art and Design (GAD) specialization was launched in September 2019 within the Production Design MA programme at the University. At present there are no undergraduate courses in this subject in Hungary, so there was no pre-established framework of subject matter knowledge to build upon. The idea was conceived by Rajk and another internationally significant teacher at the University, the film director Ildikó Enyedi. Rajk directed the admissions procedure for the new GAD course in the spring of 2019, and after his unexpected death in August of that year, his collaborators – including the authors of this report – launched the course based on Rajk's intellectual and pedagogical legacy.

The teaching of the Game Art and Design specialisation builds both on the game design and level design courses and on the visual and creative art courses that form part of Production Design. This is where students meet concepts such as concept art, character design, 3D modelling, environment design, UX/UI design, as well as game playwriting and storyboard creation. The University's wide variety of courses in film further complement these with subjects such as scriptwriting, sound design and cinematography.

Methodology on the Game Art and Design Master of Arts Programme

Following two years of working together, we have come to see that personal experience counts the most in students' performance. The processing of the influence of their environment, the lived experience of social inequality, made studying a tool
for the comprehension of such phenomena and their interconnectedness, while the current relevance of the subject led to stronger motivation. Although the courses building on one another worked well in the teaching programme as a unified process, we found that the impulses and experiences that students were subjected to were necessary to the appearance of design and flow in the study process.

In the 21st century an increasing amount of evidence has pointed to the important role of digital games in education. We focus in this report on the special relationship between game experience and motivation. What struck us most over the teaching period already mentioned, was that experience-centric, personal experience, which strengthens and encourages the spark of intrinsic motivation in the students. In order to give credence to this process we believe it is necessary to present on detail its contextual setting: our educational aims and the methods we used to attain them.

Our teaching built on the two pillars already mentioned: game and level design, and game art. Students (six persons) admitted to the MA programme, and came from various BA (Bachelor of Arts) courses (graphic design, scenography, media design) around the country. It was important at the beginning of the course to discover the extent of their prior knowledge, minimise differences, and lay the foundations for game design. The courses were based on the centrality of experience, and we endeavoured to build aspects relating to the creation of game experience into the teaching methodology in all four semesters.

Experience Centric – Immersion – Motivation

A factor in the teaching of game and level design teaching and in the area of game art education was that the basics of development should be acquirable with little knowledge of software and the acquisition of only a very few new approaches. One of the basic reasons for this was to ensure that students could experience *success* as quickly as possible with easily available tools but within a visually stimulating environment. We thought in terms of small steps, giving criteria in the case of wider themes (i.e., someone enters or leaves through a door), and providing the choice of several possibilities for concrete topics. For this reason, the teaching staff on game art and game design including György Droste and Bálint Márk selected tools (for example, *Bitsy* (2017), *Mega Man Maker* (2017), *Twine* (2009)), with which it was possible to produce complete mini games in a short period of time. By using these programmes students came into contact with different areas. While in the case of *Mega Man Maker* the emphasis was on practising level design, *Bitsy* brought game design and visual scenery to the fore, as well as the experience of bringing a game from an idea to a (complete) playable game with testing. As supervisors we reduce the choices of the students through the selection of subjects and the restrictions of

the given programmes, but within the given framework, every possibility for decision making remains, whether we are speaking in terms of *Bitsy*, *Twine*, or other programmes.

Motivation is of key importance in our work. In the case of learning processes, the completion of courses and the attainment of a good grade (extrinsic motivation) cannot lead to the same strength of motivation as when someone completes a subject from internal compulsion. Intrinsic motivation, as a special factor, can only validate itself if the necessary conditions are a given, and if it is not prematurely extinguished by external factors. The marking at the end of the semester is a formal given, and the delay of extrinsic motivation offers an excellent possibility for the formation of intrinsic motivation. The attainment of the big goal – the completion of the exam at the end of the semester and the attainment of the grade – are not a great motivating force in themselves. However, smaller tasks and quickly attained experiences of success in the game design, level design and game art courses made this distant goal less relevant to students. This is why they were able to concentrate better on concrete tasking and subjects. What was surprising was that the rapidly acquired experiences of success were not in themselves 100% capable of forming intrinsic motivation and later flow experience. In the case of intrinsic motivation, freedom of choice and the possibility to decide was a major factor.

The Cold War theme offered by the OSA in the second semester produced the surprise. In their first year, students were asked to present an idea for a game and a gaming space that was grounded in the reflection of social issues and the possibilities of working through the past. They were encouraged to take the resources of the OSA

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at the CEU as their starting point. Over the first semester they looked at issues such as the system of informers, show trials and the Socialist system's education system (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Three rendered pictures from *80's Classroom* by Zsanett Szemes.

To our surprise, the students practically *suffered* in dealing with the material. Even though the students selected topics that seemed exciting, like: prison and canteen under Socialism; the planting of bugs and surveillance; and the construction of bunkers (see figure 2). The students said that they were not able to identify with, and enjoy, these themes.

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Figure 2. A rendered picture from *Shelter* by Dominika Horváth.

In the meantime, Covid-19 appeared in Hungary, and education continued in the online sphere due to regulations of in-person social interactions. Upon seeing the result of the task and the lack of motivation, we initially put this down to the pandemic. However, running in parallel was a mini game course that reflected on the Covid-19 pandemic (*Corona Anthology* 2020).[i] While Unit was the visualisation tool for the OSA theme, they used *Bitsy* for the mini game task (see figure 3).
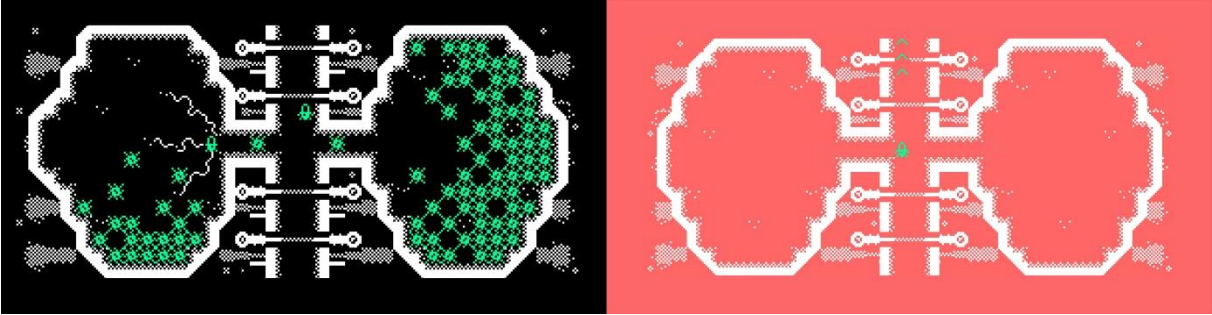
Figure 3. Montaged snapshots from *MEN* by Zsanett Szemes.

Bitsy is a game building programme that is easily acquired and learnt. It has the advantage that students can relatively quickly experience the process of game design and realization from the beginning to the result. Far more exciting results (games) were produced in the *Bitsy* task than in the OSA project. At the time we did not yet appreciate the reason, but in the following semester further unexpected things happened.

Eastern European Courage through Game Art

After the first year there was no further need for sources relating to the past. The consequences of the change of model in Higher Education introduced by the Hungarian government (state universities were transformed into institutions controlled by foundations) meant that students were confronted in very personal terms with the need to take on social responsibility. The universities subject to this

transformation lost their autonomy and governing boards were appointed based on political not professional considerations. The students of the University of Theatre and Film Arts reacted to this injustice by placing the buildings of the university under a blockade and – along with their teachers – raised public awareness of the issues associated with the change of model through various performance acts (see figure 4). Students of the Game Art and Design course addressed these events by attempting to create games for those who were not involved and those who showed solidarity.

Figure 4. Performances at the buildings of the university under the blockade 2020. Photo by Szabolcs Pálfi.

There is an interesting parallel between the social role in which the founder of the course, László Rajk, played in the 1970s and 1980s in the struggle for democracy and the role taken by the students in 2020 for the autonomy of the university. At the same time, there is an interesting contradiction from our point of view, in that the students could only identify and comprehend the historical events of the 1940s and 1950s in terms of the Open Society project while as participants in the current events they were able to reflect creatively on the loss of university autonomy without our mentoring assistance.

We now turn in the second part of this report to two video games and an interactive installation that reflect on the unusual situation in which they were created. In all cases, individually lived experience played a significant role. Students created these games in cooperation with each other in order to allow those in solidarity with their struggle to experience interactively the events that were taking place.

Let's blockade it! Student Simulator

Over the incredibly packed 71 days of the occupation of the university students were forced into a decision-making quandary that demanded an immediate reaction. The new management of the university, appointed illegitimately in the view of the students by the new Board of Governors, attempted by various means to prevent the university teaching taking place alongside the blockade: on several occasions they declared the semester to be invalid, or turned off the power supply and the Internet etc. In the meantime, an intrinsic regulatory system emerged that involved students and staff discussing the events of the day at online forums in the evening. There were sometimes forums for students only, sometimes mixed student/teacher forums, all of which operated on a democratic basis, meaning that the discussion of one problem or another required a great deal of patience. This meant that decisions were made jointly, and moderators assisted in the operation of the forums.

The blockade had to be abandoned after 71 days because of regulations introduced due to the Covid-19 situation. However, the events of these two and a half months provided the basis for Áron Heppes's *Twine*-project *Foglaljunk hát!* (2020).[ii] With the assistance of playwright and film scriptwriting students he made the events of the blockade re-liveable with a diary-like approach (see figure 5).
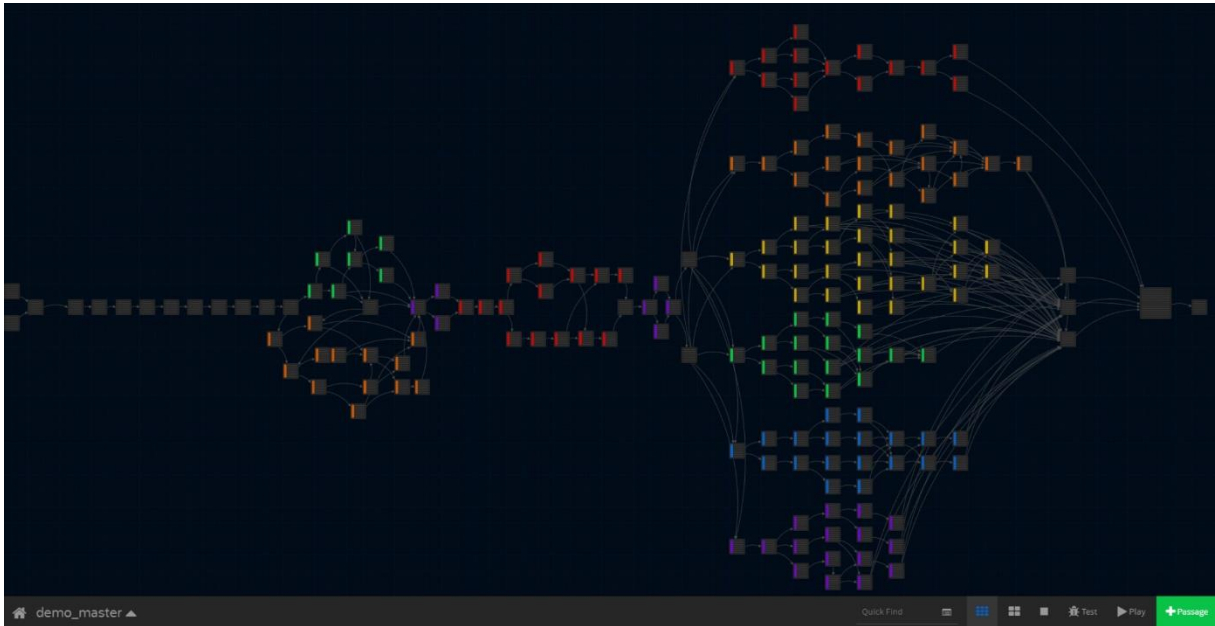
Figure 5. *Twine*-project *Foglaljunk hát!*

Áron Heppes as forum moderator selected two things from their experiences: one was how difficult it was to be objective, and the second, was how small decisions can have very serious consequences. Heppes pondered several times what would have happened if he could have gone back in time and replay the decisions. This gave him the basic idea to make the events of the blockage re-livable in various ways in a game based in *Twine*. This programme is a textual html-based framework, which provides the possibility for the production of parallel, not linear, narratives, allowing for decisions to change the narrative outcome.

Heppes original idea would have involved a personal diary, but as more students became involved in the project, this changed into a communal diary. It contained events within the forced lifting of the blockade. The basic task was to edit the 71-day period filled with events into a system. Heppes received assistance in this from Gábor Németh, a lecturer in scriptwriting, who rethought the theme of his course devoting it to our course for that semester in order to mentor the students. The work was divided into three phases: first, building the linear narrative of the real events of the

71 days. The size of the project is reflected in the fact that this phase was divided into more than 500 units. The second step was to create those periods when the lines depart from each other due to the different possible outcomes of decision-making situations and after which the player can return to the linear narrative line. The third phase of the project was to have entailed fiction as according to the plan fictive events would have been interwoven into the real framework in order to increase the gaming experience.

The demo version contains various decision situations over twelve days of real events (unfortunately in Hungarian only). Áron Heppes decided on the basis of the around one-hour of playable material that the game was too boring due to its documentary character and the project remained incomplete. There are several reasons for this failure. One was the basic problem that the team did not decide in time who the game was aimed at: the students playing an active role in the blockade or the civilians who were showing solidarity with them. In the case of the latter, the third phase of the project would have been especially important – the scripting of fictive elements – but this did not take place and the relates to the second, more significant reason for the failure, which was that the project was started during the blockade of the university (on around its 50th day), but the creators were not as motivated following the forced abandonment of the blockage (due to national pandemic regulations) by their experiences in the online sphere. The common lived experience of the 71-days at the university continued to motivate them for a while, but – based on students' feedback – the lack of personal contact as a result of the Covid-19 situation and the limits on personal cooperation along with online teaching and forums extinguished their enthusiasm. Despite this, we would like to emphasise that Heppes started and

managed this large-scale project while fulfilling his university tasks as well and that we hope that following the clarification of mistakes, will one day be realised as a result of new motivation.

A Virtual Chain of Solidarity

One such event of the resistance was a demonstration on the 6th of September which protesters creating a human chain passed the Charta Universitatis – a document guaranteeing university autonomy – from the blockaded buildings to Parliament. Two students Krisztina Gaál and Dániel Herczeg used this demonstration attracting 10 – 15 000 people for their game entitled *A Virtual Chain of Solidarity* (2020) (see figure 6).[iii]

Figure 6. Chain of Solidarity in Budapest 2020, photo by Szabolcs Pálfi, and *A Virtual Chain of Solidarity*.

The text forms an especially important part of the game because the context of the basic situation was the fact that the Government was not prepared to enter into a dialogue with students during the occupation of the university, forcing the students to use a more creative means to get their message across.

"Charta Universitatis

In the spirit of the millennium-spanning concept of the universitas, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Magna Charta Universitatum, the community of the University of Film and Theatre Arts (SZFE) hereby declare the principles that govern the present and future endeavours of our university. For centuries, university autonomy has been an incontrovertible and inalienable universal value, rooted in European culture, hence it is an integral part of the rule of the law and the democratic set of values of Hungary. The autonomy of higher education is indispensable to conduct active and productive education and research. The Magna Charta Universitatum is the manifest that asserts the autonomy of European universities. It emphasises that universities must be separated from political and economic powers and underlines that they must be ethically and intellectually independent. In accordance with this, the Fundamental Law of Hungary declares in its Freedom and Responsibility clause that Hungary ensures the freedom of scientific research and artistic creation, as well as, the freedom of learning, and within framework, the freedom of teaching. The University of Theatre and Film Arts is an autonomous institution that creates and conveys cultural values through education, artistic expression and theoretical research. Our university's educational, artistic and research activities are inseparable from each other. Our university must be ethically and intellectually independent of any political and economic influence. The freedom of education, creation, and research is fundamental to the operation of the university. These freedoms must be respected by the sustainer and the university community. As a Hungarian and European higher education institution the university SZFE strives to enrich and share universal knowledge. In this pursuit it disregards geographical and political borders and pronounces the compelling necessity of the knowledge of and the interactions with different cultures. The university must ensure the freedom of the students and the conditions under which they can make use of their education to the fullest, internalise universal human values in the service of advancing Hungarian culture in accordance to their student oaths. Budapest, August 31. 2020" (*A Virtual Chain of Solidarity* 2020, Dániel Herczeg's translation)

Dániel Herczeg stood guard at the university buildings that were subject to the blockade and from where the human chain started off, so he only saw the beginning of the event and its live streaming. Many people expressed their regret in comments on social media that they could not take part in the movement. This was the idea that

inspired Dániel Herczeg to pass on the experience to those showing solidarity with the students through a game, whether they had been unable to take part in it or simply wanted to relive it. This makes the game a documentation of the event at the same time. Complimented by the participation of Krisztina Gaál, they chose the *Bitsy* programme they had become acquainted with in the first semester to realise the project. This simple gaming motor can show the movements of a central character in a rectangular space so the player itself became the charter, whose route is passed from hand to hand by those acting in solidarity in the human chain. This meant that the aim of the game is identical to that of the real event: getting the charter from the university's blockaded buildings to Parliament. The students organising the human chain did not choose the shortest route, but rather chose to pass in front of several universities in order to emphasise the severity of the issue of the change of model in Higher Education. The space of the game shows a stylised map along with the facades of the most significant buildings (created by Rebeka Artim) so that even players who are unfamiliar with Budapest can comprehend the location. The rhythm of the game is provided by the ruse that the points enshrined in the charter – and which in reality were read out in front of the university – are given to the gamer in the details of the significant locations.

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The colour symbolism of the game is also important. Given that *Bitsy*'s limited system can only show three colours at one time, the cordons of the university buildings under blockade are shown in red and white and the characteristic yellow of the masks worn by the university occupying students. The game was produced within a week. Unfortunately, the rapid flow of events meant that no time remained for the distribution of the game.

The occupation of the university was accompanied from day one onwards by strong media attention and this led to the continuous presence of those showing solidarity in front of the blockaded building. The plethora of contributions (food, drink, etc.) and offers (printing, sewing, transportation) meant students had to create a special working group on logistics. Despite the unexpectedly large amount of support, the crowd of 10 – 15.000 that gathered in 30°C at the event planned over only a few days seemed unimaginable. Here too, one of the keys to its success was to be found in lived experience. Students were drawn in by the feeling based on the real events and this led to the formation of intrinsic motivation. This was seen in the fact that the students were more active and interested in the topic than before, and at the same time they became more independent. No support from teaching staff was needed to his, or for Áron Heppes's game development, only personal experience. The human chain took place on Day 6 of the occupation and by this time student fatigue ended the flow. Quite apart from the lived experience, the success of the project was enabled by the rapid reaction to events, the correct choice of game motor for the idea, and cooperation between students.

The Bastion of Autonomy

The third project under presentation is not a video game but an interactive installation. It is however its experience-centric form and cooperative content provided a good opportunity for involving playfully those in solidarity with the cause. Two students on our project course Rebeka Artim and Máté Kudar cooperated with acting student Barnabás Rohonyi to realise the project. *The Bastion of Autonomy* is an installation made from 25 industrial pallets and was set up on October 9, 2020 in front of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology – the ministry overseeing the changes to the Higher Education System (see figure 7).

Figure 7. The Bastion of Autonomy. Photo by Freeszfe Society.

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Earlier, the new Chancellor (financial head) of the university Gábor Szarka had attempted to enter the university building but had been prevented in doing so by students, who then decided to strengthen the blockage. The first plans envisaged the building of the *Bastion* in front of the entrance to the university, but this was abandoned due to fire safety considerations. This led to the building of the *Bastion* at the ministry, whose minister had not been prepared to enter into dialogue with the students.

With the permission of Budapest Police, the bastion was allowed to stand from 15:00 on 9 October to 15:00 on 16 October 2020, on the condition that organisers were continuously present 24 hours a day. This gave rise to the idea that those individuals who were in solidarity with the students and had previously offered to help guard the occupied university could be asked to guard the *Bastion*. However, the regulations for

the occupation of the university meant that only registered students were allowed to take this role. This meant that the *Bastion*'s creation led to direct contact between students and those in solidarity with them (mainly students from other universities), who were able to experience the pros and cons of guarding the area. The location also turned into a collection point for contributions within a very short time which – along with words of support – further motivated the students, even if the weather conditions meant guard work was not always a pleasure. In the meantime, those in solidarity with the students continuously moved into the bastion and helped form it with banners and flags thus strengthening its symbolic function.

Besides being physically present, supporters also read on the hour between eight in the morning and eight in the evening the demands of the students through a public address system. These demands had been adopted on the first day of the occupation:

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> "Guaranteed autonomy for the university!
> We reject the law on the change of model for the university in its present form!
> We reject the way in which board of governors and the supervisory board were appointed!
> We reject basic documentation by the operating body (ministry)!
> We reject any appointed leader imposed on us!
> We demand the reinstatement of the University Senate's legal powers!
> We demand the adoption of the basic documents approved by the Senate before it dissolved itself!
> We demand the resignation of the current Board of Governors!
> We demand that the basic rights of the Foundation are not transferred from the state to the Foundation!
> We demand that the state does not withdraw completely from the financing of the university!
> We demand that the name of the university be reinstated in the name of the foundation!
> We strongly state that we distance ourselves from all party politics and ask them to respect our cause by staying away from it!

Until further notice only registered students are allowed to enter the university."
(Manifesto and Demands. Written by the Students of SZFE. Read out in public in
2020. Unpublished manuscript.)

The success of the bastion came from the fact that it was able to involve a wider
stratum in actively taking part in resistance, who while having nothing to gain or lose,
were able to share the lived experience of the students (through the experience of
collective solidarity) both in terms of uplifting and painful experiences. Its success
also shows to a new turning point. At the same time as the demolition of the Bastion
was taking place, students were given a new ultimatum to lift the blockade and leave
the occupied buildings (which were also their halls of residence) from the newly
appointed interim head of the university. While students debated their next move at
a forum lasting several hours, several thousand supporters gathered at the university
upon hearing the news of the ultimatum. Some of them asked permission from the
authorities to rebuild the Bastion near the university. The Bastion's success shows that
supporters after sharing the experiences of the students – but independently from
them – began to take action in support of them.

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Conclusion

Our programmes first years (2019-21) took place in very special circumstances when,
besides the Covid-19 pandemic, a political decision that questioned the autonomy of
Hungary's universities was made. The lack of identification with the OSA project
meant that students were hardly, or not at all, motivated in the project work. Intrinsic
motivation did not come about in an acceptable way. Contrary to this, the reduced
social interaction caused by Covid-19 restrictions, and the consequences of the
change of work models for the university, led to greater intrinsic motivation. Students

were able to focus better on their subjects, and were motivated by the changes in their personal circumstances. Working together, and with various performative tools, they fought for their rights.

Flow came about alongside the balance between challenge and ability through intrinsic motivation, the right amount of curiosity, the ease in attaining small aims, and rapid feedback. An important experience for us was the extent to which personal experience and its relevance can increase the possibility for the formation of flow. In education, the centrality of experience and within this personal, interactive experience, may be the key to effective learning. Intrinsic motivation can come about due to the external drive of current affairs, or social, perhaps environmental changes. The processing and comprehension of this is a process whose tools can be sought in education. Thanks to its unusual characteristics, an arts university can react creatively to a political decision putting its very existence in question.

In this case study we have presented those reactions in which students on the GAD courses were the project leaders (two cases) and realised their ideas in cooperation with students from other subjects. The students of the various departments reacted naturally in different ways over the 71 days of the occupation: for example, some marked the national holiday marking the 1956 Revolution on October 23 with a commemoration to get Budapest moving with a relay race between universities showing solidarity and covered it with media including video clips and a documentary film etc. This also depended on the way in which students took part in events and of course there were those who chose passive resistance. It is important to note that these reflections are the result of the intrinsic motivation of the students and that the teaching staff – who fought in other ways for the autonomy of the university – did not manage, but rather simply supported and where necessary assisted in these

projects during the occupation of the university. The compulsion to reflect on the world around us, on social issues and the search for solutions to injustice is also a result of the fact that the foundation of Art is freedom – and this is what we can inherit and pass on. Showing civil courage and solidarity through art is also the heritage of László Rajk, who founded the course.

Epilogue

In November 2020 the new leadership took control of the university that had been abandoned under duress by the students. Some of the GAD course students – like so many others from other courses at the university – chose to continue their studies abroad. The remainder completed their degrees in the summer of 2021. The writers of this report resigned from the university after the final exam had taken place, and are now continuing their teaching in the Freeszfe Society.

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[ii] The video game *Foglaljunk hát!* Is available at https://freeszfe.itch.io/foglaljunk-hat.
[iii] The video game *A Virtual Chain of Solidarity* is available at https://daniel-herczeg.itch.io/a-virtual-chain-of-solidarity.

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