

Reflections of practitioners: Students participating in school LARPs in 1999–2017 and their transformations in socio-cultural context

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Abstract: The article is an outcome of the analysis of student transformations observed in the participants of 27 live-action role-plays which took place in the years 1999–2017 in a high school in Łochów (Poland). Seven areas of observations of the transformations have been identified: 1) the difficulty of introducing the LARP technique at school; 2) the attractiveness of voluntary participation; 3) incidents of hate speech; 4) playing for the pleasure of participation and playing for a measurable outcome/mission accomplishment; 5) student attitudes to historical realities and fantasy conventions; 6) type of engagement: focus on private history and participation in major social events; 7) student attitudes: commitment on the side of evil and on the side of good; selecting moral and immoral methods to achieve goals. The authors attempted to hypothesize about the possible reasons for the transformations (or their lack) and draw conclusions.

Keywords: LARP, Live-Action Role-Playing games, education, theatrical role-playing games, activating teaching techniques

There have been some great achievements of Western schools – for example the Scandinavian ones – in the use of Live Action Role-Playing games for teaching and socialisation (cf. Gade, Thorup, Sander, 2003; Bøckman, Hutchison, 2005; Holter, Fatland, Tømte, 2009). It is difficult to equal Polish education to them in this respect, but the authors of this paper believe that it is worthwhile to share some observations, because even though the employed LARP techniques are similar, the environment of Polish schools is completely different – both in terms of the schooling system, as well as in terms of the typical teachers’ and students’ attitudes. Our observations were made on the basis of several dozen LARPs¹ played in a provincial Polish secondary school, which makes it possible not to take into account the variability of the social environment – the great difference between the big cities, the medium and the smallest ones. The instructor was one person, which allows for an exclusion of the personal variable. Therefore, the students and their transformations over the course of 18 years (1999–2017) can be analysed along with the ever changing system of Polish education. It is also important that the co-author of this article (Jerzy Zygmunt Szeja) led and co-led LARPs of various forms organised for fans on many conventions throughout Poland² and participated as a player in many others.³ He also conducted trainings for teachers and librarians on the use of theatrical techniques of role-playing games. He is also able to compare the technique to another one, with a well established reputation in school education – the drama technique, which he also employed at school for several years. His knowledge of many activating techniques is also important, including many years of school debate (Karl Popper, *policy* and Oxford formats). The other co-author (Augustyn Surdyk), in 2000–2003, during classes of practical English language at an advanced academic level, used his own Technique

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¹ 24 classic LARPs and 3 events with a predominance of LARP techniques.

² 13 LARPs.

³ 37 LARPs and *Wild Fields* (Pl.: *Dzikie Pola*) system feasts (these were meetings in costumes, with roles being dealt, during which some of the participants performed their role assignments, and some only conversed, styling accordingly during the feast; for simplicity’s sake these events are not called LARPs in the *Wild Fields* system, but a ‘feast’, as very often such meetings in costumes, styled like a 17th-century feast, would not realise any plot, despite the organisers’ aims, the conceptual work or the collection of props).

of Role-Playing Games,⁴ constructed on the basis of the classic narrative role-playing games,⁵ while carrying out research for his PhD dissertation (Surdyk, 2003)⁶ and also conducted trainings for foreign language teachers with the use of this technique.⁷

The knowledge gained from the discussions after the school LARPs is also essential, as well as the insight gained from the regular conversations during their organisation or from the student's memories – even after many years the game had been played.

The theatrical role-playing games technique has many applications in education, but in our presentation we are most interested in the transformation that students have undergone over the past 18 years. It is important, because on the one hand, the use of any teaching technique is only effective if the instructor knows the students well. Without such knowledge it is impossible to effectively teach and educate them. On the other hand LARPs are an excellent way to get to know them. What is also important is that the transformation of the youth is a reflection of the transformation of culture as a whole, and after all, such knowledge is important not only for educational reasons.

It is obvious to the authors of the article that the mere observing of the LARP attendees' behaviour and the possibility to compare even dozens of such games, without the support of appropriate research, in

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⁴ Described, characterised and presented from many pedagogical, linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives by Surdyk (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b), Aleksandrak et al (2002), Surdyk, Glinka (2002).

⁵ The terms 'narrative role-playing game' (Pl: *narracyjna gra fabularna*) and 'theatrical role-playing game' (Pl: *teatralna gra fabularna*) were coined by Szeja (2000, 2004, 2011a, 2011b) to differentiate the classic ('tabletop'/pen-and-paper') type from LARPs and other, new kinds of RPG, for example computer role-playing game (cRPG). A definition of RPG was proposed by Surdyk (2007a, 2007b).

⁶ During this period, 47 TRPG sessions were held with three groups of students of philology-applied linguistics in the Department of Glottodidactics and Translation Studies (now Institute of Applied Linguistics) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

⁷ Workshops conducted for foreign language teachers at Foreign Language Teacher's College at Gdańsk University (Pl.: *Kolegium Kształcenia Nauczycieli Języków Obcych Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego*) in 2003, lecture and workshop for teachers at the Department of Glottodidactics and Translation Studies (*Katedra Glottodydaktyki i Translatoryki*) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2006, Centre for Mastering Teachers in Poznań (Pl.: *Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli w Poznaniu*) in 2007, EMPiK School in Poznań in 2011.

the form of interviews, surveys, and other analyses with scientifically validated procedures and credibility, would not allow for inferences at an appropriate level of precision. The authors, however, think that it was not, is not, and in the foreseeable future will not be possible to make an appropriate scientific study of the proposed material. Therefore, their suggestion is that this material should be treated as a series of reflections, which may be, for example, an introduction to a debate, or perhaps to a proper study cycle. We think that any reflection can be useful and may lead to scientific activity whose effects may be valuable. We believe that participant observation has a number of advantages, nevertheless, it can never be the only method if it is meant to lead to scientific conclusions.

1. The difficulty of introducing LARP technique at school

From year to year it was less troublesome to introduce the idea of the LARP game. Or to explain the principles/existence of fantasy worlds (of course, this element is only relevant to a certain sort of LARPs – but we used to initially start with these – for example, with the setting of J. R. R. Tolkien’s universe, while later on games set in historical worlds or Polish novels were more predominant). It was probably caused by an increase of the number of players (especially of cRPG) and the common knowledge of the fantasy convention – mainly owing to the blockbuster films based on the literary classics from this genre.

2. Attractiveness of voluntary participation

It was becoming increasingly difficult to gather the whole group for many hours in the evening or at the weekend for a LARP – despite the reduction of transport issues, always important at the provincial school, where most students commute from the surrounding area. The wealth of society has grown so much that every student can ask to be picked up by their parents or someone from the family, or even a neighbour. The public transport network has also improved – albeit the frequencies and routes

of trains have been unchanged for years, the number of private bus lines has increased. However, for many students a theatrical role-playing game is no more attractive than staying in a Warsaw shopping centre or a multiplex – at a comparable time expense. Even home entertainment (TV, computer, console) seems more interesting to some students and requires less effort. 18 years ago a LARP at school did not have to face such competition.

3. Incidents of hate speech

A number of journalistic observations and more serious analyses indicate that hate speech and internet hate keeps spreading among members of modern society, especially among the youth. The authors of this observation have not noticed significant differences in this regard in the span of 18 years among the groups participating in LARPs. In the course of the games, indeed there were some occasional incidents. It was also the case that the elements of hate speech appeared on the internet as a result of some of the LARPs. Nevertheless, there has been no noticeable increase in this aspect. This seems to us an important observation, which would not be possible on the basis of classroom behaviour alone – and the teachers usually do not have any access to students' attitudes, unobstructed by observation, during breaks and outside of school. We believe, therefore, that perhaps the indications of the spreading of the phenomena from the hate speech spectrum are due to the ease of their observation on the internet. And maybe it is just on the internet and in the press where hate has been on the rise, whereas outside the media the phenomenon is not gaining as much momentum as one might deduce while reading the headlines and comments on social networks.

4. Playing for the pleasure of participation and playing for a measurable outcome/mission accomplishment

When analysing the behaviour of students participating in LARPs, we noticed a slight leaning in motivation towards the effectiveness

of a result/outcome-oriented game. Over the years we have been able to see the tendency to compete for the result at the expense of a para-theatric gaming/pure-play attitude. These are not very strong changes, but they seem important. We associate them with the general focus of the Polish education system on the didactic measurement expressed in points, which is reflected in the practice of continuous testing, learning to be tested, and the subordination of the assessment of the teaching quality to test scores. A numerical score of the junior secondary school exam determines admission to a better secondary school, while the secondary school exam (*matura*) defines the possibility of attending free day studies at a good state university. The authors of the observation believe that, in the light of such an attitude of the Polish education system, the pursuit of the students participating in the school games to achieve a high measurable result – such as the best performance of the tasks stemming from a character sheet – is relatively moderate. It could be expected to be stronger, especially at LARPs whose results were later translated into course assessments/bonuses (about 25% of all the didactic LARPs). Perhaps the element of fun is enough to encourage students not to care about scores – despite LARPing at school under the tutelage of the teacher.

On the other hand, the constantly increasing interest in maximising the achievements can be observed among the students who play narrative role-playing games and their computer counterparts. We believe this is the result of a typical attitude arising from the desire to improve the effectiveness of a character whose features are described in points. This phenomenon has remained unchanged from the very beginning of our observations of LARPs.

Within the 18 years of using theatrical role-playing games in high school, there was a significant reform of the Polish education system and in September 2002 junior secondary school graduates arrived at the secondary schools. We believe they differed from the previous generations as they displayed a better attitude towards activating teaching methods (it was also manifest in relation to the drama technique), which seems to be the merit of not only the junior secondary schools, but also of the relevant curricula. In the face of the current reform that not only eradicates the junior secondary school but also restores the primacy

of lecturing methods and the pre-eminence of knowledge over skills, it may be expected there will be more difficulty in introducing LARPs into schools. Even more so, this effort may be necessary because of the anticipated overall decline in the activeness and the so-called soft skills, the technique of theatrical role-playing games may compensate for these shortcomings among the subsequent student generations.

5. Students' attitudes to historical realities and fantasy conventions

During the analysed period of time, there was a change in the attitude of the participants towards the convention in which the LARPs were played. The convention may be roughly divided into historical and fantasy. It is true that relatively few LARPs tried to recreate a historical moment from the point of view of history as an academic discipline (Cf. Mochocki, 2009, 2012), though the basis for the construction of a given situation was a literary work, yet the primary objective was to make a reference to the moment in our country's history, not the artistic convention. The categories of epic, comedy, tragedy, grotesque etc., are difficult to apply to theatrical role-playing games, whereas referring to a specific vision of the past is rather typical. In turn, fantasy worlds are generally ahistorical, in the sense that the majority of them reproduces the medieval world of the Middle Ages with the addition of a certain amount of magic and miracles. Even if there is a history of these worlds, in terms of the realities of life, the default behaviours and costumes, they remain virtually unchanged. On the other hand, the difference in the characters' history, the required behaviours, and the created mentality between, for example, the characters of the *Trilogy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz and *Sir Thaddeus* by Adam Mickiewicz are huge. The same 200-year difference, e.g., in Tolkien's universe is insignificant, does not induce any change in the game.

While at the beginning the students had more difficulty with playing fantasy characters, which disappeared over time (see point 1), over the years we have noted not only increasing trouble in recreating historical realities, but also a growing indifference to such an issue. We believe

the main reason for this is the constant decline in the students' historical knowledge. The declarations of some young people seem to suggest yet another reason: in a fast-changing world, it is difficult to establish a credible image of the present moment, and if it turns out possible to construct it, it becomes outdated too soon to be worth paying attention to. In such a situation the members of the younger generation are more indifferent to knowledge about the state of the past. Contrary to the image of the ever-changing modernity and the difficult complexity of the past, fantasy worlds are tempting in their stability. In such universes it is easier to avoid anachronism, and even if it is committed – it is less important, because the worlds are evidently invented. We believe that the difference is due to the nature of such a recreation: a specific fantasy world has only one author and it is relatively easy to determine the details of its subcreation that were defined. Whereas the story of our 'real' world is very complex, its knowledge requires incomparably greater effort and the motivations of the characters are much more complex and more debatable than the literary heroes which we have access to in literature or fantasy films. At school LARPs, students more often reveal good knowledge of the works of such writers as Tolkien than of history or even the *Trilogy* by Sienkiewicz.

6. Type of engagement: focus on private history and participation in major social events

The following analysis refers only to classical (non-pedagogical) LARPs, and among the didactic ones only Polish-classes LARPs have been analysed. Historical LARPs were excluded because the character sheets did not provide much choice: they did not allow the players to decline involvement in historical events in favour of private quests.

The authors of this paper argue that the attitudes of young people over the years change in correlation with the attitudes of the whole population, which is contrary to all the assertions that the youngest group of Polish citizens does not contemplate topics related to politics and the discourse related to our history and its interpretation. Looking at the choices of the particular characters, it can be noticed that over

a dozen years ago involvement in more general topics was chosen more often – with a focus on collective action. Otherwise: when a character had a choice and there was no special imperative for any particular action (e.g., pressure from the other characters – the players’ character sheets and the game masters’ attitudes were balanced in this respect), participation in collective tasks for the common good was relatively more frequent. This trend has been in decline year after year – the characters usually first pursued their personal objectives, later, if it did not interfere with their private tasks, they tried to achieve social goals (e.g., patriotic ones). If they acted under the pressure of time, they tried to achieve their personal goals (e.g., pursuing matrimonial or financial affairs). In the last few years, perhaps under the influence of great disputes concerning older and recent Polish history, this trend seems to shift. Maybe some equilibrium will be reached soon. Perhaps it will be a testimony to the greater social maturity of this part of the population, perhaps only an increase in awareness of the significance of such problems. LARP does not offer its observers (that is, game masters, as no one else is supposed to observe the game) the possibility to distinguish between what is more interesting to the participant and what is more important and flows from the deeper beliefs, and is a symptom of maturity. A collective post-LARP analysis (the so-called circle) is ineffective in this respect, because of two phenomena. First of all, explaining in public one’s commitment to social issues puts the participant in a better light, and the character’s story is more interesting for more participants. Conversely, personal issues are less important to other participants and sharing the joy of executing them with others will not generate so much interest from the audience. Secondly, involvement in social topics could end in failure (which is typical of LARPs based on the classics of the Polish literature from the time of the Partitions), and yet stands as evidence to some sort of heroism or patriotic attitude. It is hard to be so enthusiastic about personal failure, which is rather a testimony of a character’s unsuccessful actions or of the superior skills or talents of their opponents. For these reasons, albeit we are certain of the effectiveness of our observations during LARPs, we cannot, in this aspect, disambiguate the participants’ post-LARP conclusions and statements.

7. Student attitudes: commitment on the side of evil and on the side of good; selecting moral and immoral methods to achieve goals

During these 18 years, there has been no clear tendency towards a change in the moral attitudes of participants, such as a more frequent selection of effective and immoral behaviour, or vice versa. Researchers remember the general difficulty in assessing such behaviour since LARP is a game, not a reality, therefore, extreme caution must be exercised before issuing ethical judgements in relation to one's conduct in a fictitious game world. Nevertheless, the issue is important and interesting and hence has been analysed. The only relatively certain observation was that when a group knew each other they would more often employ cynical motivations, which were popular in the sense of their playfulness (giving rise to smiling/laughter/amusement, though not applauding the attitude). There have been many publications analysing from the psychological point of view the questions of playing the role, identification of the player with the character and the evolution of players' attitudes – e.g. by Dawidowicz (2001), Chmielnicka-Kuter (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b), Montola, Stenros, (2004), Fritzson, Wrigstad (2006), Galińska (2007), Krysińska (2007), Zarzycka (2007), Chmielewska-Łuczak, Matkowski, (2007, 2008), Krawczyk (2008, 2009), Busse-Brandyk, Chmielewska-Łuczak (2009).

The researchers find it interesting to observe that not only the characters' belonging to the negative side (such as a senator or a Tzar's supporter) selected immoral ways of doing things more often (which can be explained by identifying with the characters themselves), but also the choice of the first step had an impact on the consecutive choices (i.e., when characters entered the unethical path they usually remained on it). It is also worth to point out that choosing a patriotic path (in LARPs where such a path was important, especially when it was the main topic) was often combined with a rejection of ethical dilemmas: any act was good if sanctified by national liberation motivation. However, there appeared to be no connection between these phenomena: characters who chose patriotic and unethical activity, did not display the 'first-step effect' and their personal choices were not cynical.

It is difficult to summarise all the observations of the LARPs – even the above selected topics. Nevertheless, it is always worth mentioning that in today's school all activating methods – including theatrical role-playing games – are the only way to effectively teach students who are interested and motivated by them. Otherwise, schools will only perform oppressive and uniforming functions.

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Refleksje praktyków. Uczniowie biorący udział w LARP-ach szkolnych w latach 1999–2017 i ich przemiany w kontekście społeczno-kulturowym

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest wynikiem analizy zaobserwowanych uczniowskich przemian uczestników 27 teatralnych gier fabularnych, które miały miejsce w latach 1999–2017 w liceum ogólnokształcącym w Łochowie. Wydzielono siedem obszarów obserwacji przemian: 1) trudność wprowadzania techniki larpu w szkole; 2) atrakcyjność dobrowolnego uczestnictwa; 3) występowanie mowy nienawiści; 4) granie nastawione na samą przyjemność płynącą z uczestnictwa a granie nastawione na mierzalny wynik/realizację misji; 5) stosunek uczniów do realiów historycznych a do konwencji *fantasy*; 6) typ zaangażowania: nastawienie na historię prywatną a na udział w wielkich wydarzeniach społecznych; 7) postawy uczniowskie: zaangażowanie po stronie zła a po stronie dobra; dobór metod moralnych a niemoralnych w osiągnięciu celów. Autorzy starali się formułować hipotezy dotyczące prawdopodobnych powodów przemian (lub ich braku) oraz wyciągać wnioski.

Słowa kluczowe: LARP, Live Action Role-Playing games, edukacja, teatralne gry fabularne, aktywizujące techniki nauczania
