

Project System: totalitarian utopia as a role-playing game

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to determine how to educate people about complicated social topics or politics?; how to lead them to critical thinking?; and how to convey emotions or life experience they never lived through?

Design/methodology/approach – Project System is a three-day experience for adult participants concerning totalitarian regime, freedom and inequality. The Project System does not give fast and easy answers but leads participants to find them on their own. For 30 hours, participants find themselves within a larp, which is a very intense type of role-playing game based on human interactions. The author has chosen a larp as a medium as one of the most immersive and influential method of game-based learning which can facilitate topics that are normally hard to explain through conventional methods of learning. Participants learn firsthand through their roles, emotions, story and experience.

Findings – Project System was a really strong and important experience for many players that may have partially changed their lives. After more than 500 players walked through it, the author can say that this method is beneficial.

Originality/value – Larp as an educational tool is used all over the world; however, there are still only few professional organizations. Most of them are focused on using larp (or similar role-playing methods) as a tool at elementary or secondary schools. Using larp in andragogy is currently pioneering.

Keywords Gamification, Education, Game, Andragogy, Larp, Role-playing

Paper type Case study

How to educate people about complicated social topics or politics? How to lead them to critical thinking? How to convey emotions or life experience they never lived through? Project System is a three-day experience for adult participants concerning totalitarian regime, freedom and inequality. Project System does not give fast and easy answers but leads participants to find them on their own.

For 30 hours, participants find themselves within a larp. Larp is a very intense type of role-playing game based on human interactions. We had chosen larp as a medium because it is one of the most immersive and influential method of game-based learning which can facilitate topics that are normally hard to explain through conventional methods of learning. Participants learn firsthand through their roles, emotions, story and experience.

Let us see how Project System works and what its advantages in terms of andragogy are.

Larp as a medium

Larp as a separate medium emerged in the late 1970s separating itself from tabletop role-playing games. As Tychsen *et al.* (2006, p. 256) explain “LARPs can be viewed as a form of a distinct category of RPG because of two unique features: (a) The players physically embody their characters, and (b) the game takes place in a physical frame. Embodiment means that the physical actions of the player are regarded as those of the character. [...] The game space may range from a room to, in extreme cases, acres of countryside[1].” Edu-larp is the special type of this medium used to impart pre-determined pedagogical or didactic content.

Larp is an interactive medium of active learning. In this meaning, we can understand it as a part of forming participatory culture in education. Frontal presentations as part of a classical education can be considered a spectator culture, as they depend largely on the one-way stimulus-response pattern. In contrast, participation can be explained as a process



where the stimulus is a result of the participation itself. The very core of this participatory culture is freedom of choice, the possibility of action and the autonomy of these two (Nurmi, 2010, pp. 279-282).

I firmly believe that there is no need to introduce the broad topic of games in education in general. However, it is important for this paper that there is an ongoing discussion around the capability of games (especially larps) to transfer different fields of knowledge to participants. An agreement exists that it is very complicated to offer hard (subject-matter) knowledge and train hard skills through the mediums such as larp. Nevertheless, the theories trying to contradict this statement exist (see Mochocki, 2012). Larps are much more concentrated around soft skills training as they consist mainly of social interaction (see Daniau, 2016). The strong part of larp as an educational medium is connecting the contents of the game with ways of discovering this content and recreating it. “Content is only an answer, and the interesting part would be the question leading there, as well as the lines of thoughts that bring the two together [...] The answer to the question of how participants learn from learning games is ‘by exploring an academically enriched content.’” as Henriksen (2008, p. 149) puts it with emphasis on exploring as a way of learning.

Project System stays on borders of soft-skills training and subject-matter knowledge learning. In the larp itself, skills such as empathy, critical thinking, judgement, and argumenting are deepened, regardless of the content and setting of the game. The setting on the other hand opens broader topic of historic totalitarianisms in the twentieth century as a part of a reflection and generally increases the concern for this part of the history.

Basic principles of larp as an educational method

Why use larp as an educational method? Why just not read a book or watch a movie? To read something or to watch something would be much more easier, less time-consuming and less expensive (in case there actually is a book or movie on the topic you need). However, where other methods are faster or cheaper, larp is much more powerful and effective.

As players enter a magic circle of the game there are many impacts on them – obviously the visual impact, but emotional and factual as well. All senses are involved. The term “magic circle” was introduced by Johan Huizinga (1949) in the book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in the Culture*: “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (p. 10).

More than in any other type of game; in a larp, players enter a temporary world with its own special rules. They do not watch random actors eat in front of a green screen but players themselves are eating in an actual setting. They do not just read parts of a book, they live it – they go to sleep with their families and wake up in the morning in their houses with every aspect that it brings. They have to decide what to say, how to behave and how to react to situations happening around them. All within the rules established before the game began.

There are two types of rules in the larp: hard and social rules. Hard rules define specific mechanisms in the game. They say what the setting is and how to act in some specific situations (e.g. violence cannot be real and has to be substituted with a particular mechanism). We need the hard rules because without them there is no game. But education happens much more with social rules involved. Social rules are rules that are expected to be created by the players themselves. They begin with consent agreement with playing. All the

players know and agree that we are playing a game that all players behave within their roles and within their roles they feel and live their stories. In social sciences, this is known as social contract. In a game, they participate in a shared imaginary space built by themselves upon hard rules (Upton, 2015). It is a way they understand the game world, how they feel about it and what they think about their character's participation in this world. Everyone has a little bit different understanding of all that, but by sharing these various visions together they create the shared imaginary space.

Roles help players immerse into this imaginary space. They are the very specific of role-playing and larps. On the one hand, roles are necessary for the story. Without characters the story would not exist. People do not have their history and their future in the game, characters do.

However, there are other important reasons why larp uses roles and why they are beneficial for education and learning. Roles give freedom to act and provide alibi for acting in a specific way. By entering the magic circle and accepting the rules (e.g. players' role), players receive social alibi for character action (Hook, 2012, p. 57). Freedom to act rises up from social contract of consent to play. All players know that the game "is just a game." Roles give them freedom to act in this game as the story needs it. They do not have to look over their shoulders if somebody judges them. In this specific context of this magic circle, they are someone different (a character) and they can play as they feel it. There is nobody to say "you are playing it wrong," because there is no way to play it wrong if players observe the hard rules. A character can (and even should) make mistakes. Mistakes of the characters are often those behaviors that push the story further and create interesting content.

Roles give players a means, an excuse, for acting in a specific way. That means that even if the player does not agree with opinions of his or her character, he or she still can play them out. The role gives alibi to act as he or she would never do. This allows the players to try something different and become new opposite to their normal lives. In this specific case where we want to point some particular problems of totalitarian regime, we need to push the characters into the situations that they would normally never be part of. We need to give them different perspectives on what is happening and the roles provide a very good method of doing it.

At the end of the game in the reflection part, organizers lead players to speak about acts in the game as acts of the characters, not as acts of players. This ensures that there is some distance between judging what a character did and what players think about it. The players can (and actually do) even say that they were disgusted with the behavior of their own characters, but in some way they understood why the characters were doing it. This helps participants realize that normally there are reasons behind behavioral patterns of other people. They learn empathy.

With roles come emotions and the two are closely connected. As players enter the magic circle, they even start feeling as their characters. You yourself surely know it from immersing into characters in books or movies. Immersion as a process is automatic, unconscious reaction to and interaction with the environment mediated by personality trait resulting in immersive state (Lukka, 2014, p. 88). This means that a players are so "in the story" that they start feeling what the given character feels. In a larp, it is quite intense and the environment tries to foster it – by using costumes, by realistic scenery, by props that respond to the setting – everything in the place is prepared to create realistic experience. Both internal (self-suggestion) and external factors (clothing, environmental changes) affect immersion (Lukka, 2014, p. 88). Balzer (2011, p. 33) even assumes that "[...] the possibility of immersion, and not the existence of a didactical goal, is indeed the prerequisite of role-playing's didactical potential."

Whilst in the movie, the whole audience is immersing with one or two main characters, in the larp there is 40 main characters and everybody sees his or hers' own point of view. As larp is an interactive medium, players react to each other. Emotions are thus "infective."

These all suggest that the role affects the player in intrinsic way. It is not unusual that the player's feelings are real and not just acted so the player lives them over continuously sometime after the experience. This effect, when feelings pass from character to player during the game or after it, is called "bleed-out" (Bowman, 2015). This is very strong part of the experiential learning because it is a way how player recalls the experience:

As organizers we are very often asked why we want to people play totalitarian regime. "This is not fun!" they say. What is the point of all of that?

Fun does not mean that something is funny. A play can be fun and not funny at the same time. By contrary Project System is not very pleasing experience. It is often hard, very emotional and with a sad ending. Nevertheless, we have dozens of runs behind us and players are still coming – some of them repeatedly. One reason is that the experience is so intense that players are in a constant flow (Csikszentmihályi, 1990) and they experience rather the "serious" type of fun as Nicole Lazzaro (2004) has defined it.

Another reason is that players realize the importance of the topic (some of them before the game and quite everybody after the game). The Czech Republic and Slovakia are both post-communist countries. Communism had developed here into a form of totalitarian regime. It was definitely broken after the non-violent Velvet Revolution in 1989. That means that today's teenagers and young adults luckily have never experienced it or they were so little that they cannot remember it. How we can learn from the history when even moments from 20 years ago are shading to dates, names and historical facts only?

"One of the main reasons of creating Project System was to show that the totalitarian regime is not just a topic in history textbooks but a real danger," says one of the organizers (Kyša, 2012). We believe that larp is one of the best ways to do just that.

Scenery, roles and gameplay of Project System

What is Project System and how is it designed?

The three-day experience is divided into three parts: preparation before the game, the game itself and reflection of the experience after the game. Project System is usually played during the weekend. Preparation begins on Friday and there are workshops and presentations so the players get all the information needed. They learn how the game works, what is the setting of the game and they receive their characters which they will be playing for the next 24 hours.

The setting of the game is introduced to players during the preparation phase. Project System is not about learning historical facts. The totalitarian regime displayed in the game is not a historical one. We have created original scenery and setting inspired by European history to demonstrate the totalitarian regime as a concept on its own. Participants live the story in the roles of parents, students, party members and immigrants with different perspectives and unequal in-game social positions. During the reflection, which is a very important part of the learning process after the game, the participants form answers to such questions as where does the totalitarian regime begin, why is it wrong and what should we be aware of.

The story of the game takes place in a small village near the State borders separating the State from southern countries. There is a long-term totalitarian regime in the State. Players learn information necessary for the game from fictional history. The Humanitarian Party (the only party in the State) established rules and restrictions called the "System." After four decades of political dominance, the Party controls almost all aspects of lives of citizens. Freedom was replaced with a sense of security. All heavier aberrations are punished by renvoy to the Southern block or by loss of citizenship. Immigrants coming to the State are closely controlled and they have to deserve to get citizenships through community work[2]. They do not have the same rights as other citizens.

Characters are prepared so as to fit into setting and they are designed to steer players into interesting situations and to create strong relationships with other characters (Plate 1). All roles are unique. There is no strict script for players dictating how they should play. In two-page texts, they can read the main information about their roles: their name, their nature, their status, personal history and description of relations with other characters. For example, there is a role of a teenage boy whose parents are party members and he revolts against the political system. This pre-set leads him to do something illegal during the game, getting his parents into trouble in the process.

Game goals of the characters are in a form of wishes about their close future: “You want to get to the metropolitan college,” or “You want to get into the Party.” There is no guarantee that they will get what they want at the end of the game. This depends on how the players behave in their characters as well as on implications of their deeds.

Players can choose among three different social statuses in the game: they can play adults – parents in families and party members, students – teenagers living with their families or students living in a school dormitory or communal workers – former immigrants or people who had lost their citizenship. Each social status has its own visual characteristic incorporated in the costume of the role (Plate 2). Adults wear black or gray formal and boring suits, teenagers wear expressive red school uniforms and communal workers wear the same green overalls. This visual separation emphasizes the social inequality in the game and helps players recognize behavioral patterns toward different groups of people.

There are other characters: mainly investigators and state agents played by the organizers. As their roles are very arduous and they have to act responsively in very hard emotional scenes, these characters cannot be played by players. They have also some other purpose there – they know how to push a stuck story forward and they control big scenes from the inside of the game to make the scenes have the designed impact.

In summary, there are 40 players, 13 in-game organizers and around ten other organizers behind the scenes who maintain the environment and maneuver all props and playing organizers[3].



Plate 1.
Strong and realistic
personal stories are
integrated in the roles



Plate 2.
The celebration of
the day of the
equality. The color of
the costumes define
a social status
of characters

The environment of the game is made of actual props and in a realistic scenery. The game takes place both in exteriors and interiors in the location of a small recreational center which resembles a small village. The game location was chosen from many different alternatives and it was really important that the environment was chosen in order to complement the setting and the story. The recreational center is concentrated around a low building built in style of socialist realism represented in the buildings of the cultural center and the canteen in the game (Plate 3). There are small houses around, close to the forest that will become the homes of families. Separate low buildings are set up as the school, dormitory and lodgings for communal workers.

The game uses plenty of props: state flags, textbooks, thousands of pages of Party documents, characters' personal properties, decorations, even small functional radios to receive illegal broadcast from Southern countries.

The story begins after the preparation phase. After the starting point, all players assume roles of their characters in every interaction they made toward other players and the game environment. They are encouraged to play their characters throughout the entire game; however, they are not forced to play when they do not want to. The playing of the game has to be voluntary and everyone can choose to leave anytime they want to.

The basic storyline is centered around the celebration on the Day of Equality which is the main feast of the whole State celebrating the happy and safe life under the System. A silly joke made by students at the illegal party is registered by the hosting Party agent who wants to teach them a lesson. He initiates an investigation of the incident. Professional investigators come to the village in the middle of the celebration preparations and a circle of interrogations begins. During the questioning, some old secrets and problems of characters come up. This is not a problem for the students only anymore; every non-cooperating citizen or community worker is suspicious. Such allegations as treason, violation of the System or espionage arise and lead to fast and tough trial at the end of the day. Four to five characters are punished by loss of citizenship or by renyov (Plate 4). The game ends by finishing the celebrations. People who witnessed the trial

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Plate 3.
The place for the
game was chosen
so the environment
helps to create
atmosphere of gloomy
totalitarian regime



Plate 4.
Accused members
of the village are
waiting for a verdict



where their friends and family members had been unfairly taken away now have to act on the celebration of “happy” System. There is no place for a big revolution, in the end there are just sad and lost stories of individuals.

The trial is obviously manipulated by state investigators. However, among playing characters there are no clear black and white sides. Everybody wants to get out of the

investigation clean. Parents want to protect their children, students want to protect their friends and nobody wants to get under the investigators' spotlight. Every story of every character is unique. Their deeds are not senseless. That is a very important aspect of the educational process there.

Player's perspective

What is it to like playing Project System?

Marta Kubišová, a Charter 77 signatory[4], has become supporter of this larp. She sees it as a meaningful and edifying project. Who could better say that this is the right way than somebody who really walked through the hell of the totalitarian regime? For us, this is a very important reaction; however, players' approval is even more important.

Every experience, good or bad, is forming our personality and our opinions. We were quite mindful of this in a preparation of the game. In the reflection after the game, organizers lead a discussion so the experience and output from it is consented and not manipulative. The point of the aftergame reflection is to shape the experience into an actual learning process so the experience is not standing only on an uncontrolled player's bleed-out. There was a safety net of a psychologist and trained professionals present to take care of players who may feel overwhelmed.

Project System was a really strong and important experience for many players that may have partially changed their lives. Some of them said that they reconsidered their jobs, went to vote in elections (for the first time!) or changed their opinion on some historical events in response to the game. These are cases of a few of them but less dramatic reactions are equally important[5]:

I signed up for Project System because I wanted to know what it was like for our parents and grandparents in the previous regime and to find out how I would behave in a similar situation. I have no definite answer for the latter, but the answers to the first question is much clearer for me now.

The System outlined to me how I would be if I really lived in it (totalitarian regime). I need to think it over more [...].

Thanks to the System I realized what the individual's freedom we see as a self-evident means and I am really glad that I don't have to live in the similar regime.

I've been thinking back on the System very intensively for the past few weeks and I am asking myself how is it possible that I am feeling quite same as my character did. How is it possible that administrative departments in the Czech Republic care only about themselves and not about the people? [...] But thanks to God we can show our disagreement unlike the people in the Border village.

How little is needed to be decried by others of being weak, traitor, anybody, [...].

What is greater courage? To stand by my true or to abandon it to save those I love?

I am really horrified of how easily one can become a part of the regime and how easily he can excuse its existence and its "fair" principles.

I was playing the really bad guy. I had tried to not get very emotional about it and not to immerse into him because he had done really bad and immoral things. Then I realized that it is exactly this detachment that is the easy way to be processed by the system and to chuck up to others. I started taking advantage of it ruthlessly in the game. After that, I was surprised of understanding the mentality of those people. They convince themselves that it doesn't touch them.

When I was reading Orwell I had just a very imperfect idea. My feelings from the book did shade away very fast. The same happened when I was reading about purges in the Stalin era. But here I lived through it. For players there is no need for explanations [...].

“We were not supposed to only show totalitarianism to players because it is only half of the task. Along the way, we had to make them start thinking about it or perhaps visit a library or research some online data and come with an opinion of their own after the game was over,” one of the designers of the game said (Zlatohlávek and Gotthard, 2010).

Summary

Larp as a type of role-playing game is a realistic experience where players can live through various stories within the safe borders of the magic circle of the game. Project System is a larp designed to educate young adults and teenagers about the totalitarian regime. After more than 500 players walked through it, we can say that this method is beneficial.

In general, a topic of a larp does not have to be historical. Larp as a medium can cover almost every topic imaginable same as other media. Larp as an educational tool is used all over the world; however, there are still only few professional organizations. Most of them are focused on using larp (or similar role-playing methods) as a tool at elementary or secondary schools[6]. Using larp in andragogy is currently pioneering. There are some organizations that use larp as a part of the business soft skills training[7]. Topics such as training of managers or salesmen are covered: dealing with stress, time-management, leading styles, sales techniques, company culture, communication, cooperation, teamwork and many more.

We believe that the larp has definitely its place in andragogy and company training.

Notes

1. The abbreviation LARP stands for live action role-playing, however as a medium spreads through the world, it has transformed into a word “larp” (similarly as LASER – laser).
2. It is really important to say that this game was made in 2009, long before the so called “immigration crisis” started in Europe. This game was not made to react to the problem of immigration rather than to point out the problem of totalitarian regimes in general. The coincidence with current situation is quite surprising even for authors themselves but that is just the reason to use the game more.
3. There is one another very important man backstage – the psychologist. He is not always needed, but it is the part of players’ safety to know that they can leave the game any time things get too emotional for them and go talk to him.
4. The Charter 77 is an anti-communism document which started an eponymous civic initiative in the Communist Czechoslovakia. More than 240 people of public interest (singers, actors, politicians and so on) signed it and consequently were proscribed as spreading the charter was considered a political crime.
5. The following reactions of players are taken from discussions after the game. You can find some of them in Czech available at: www.projekt-system.cz/vystupy/
6. There are well-known organizations in Scandinavia where the Edu-larp Conference takes place each year. In Denmark there is a whole school, Osterskov Efterskole, which uses larp as a main educational tool (<http://osterskov.dk>).
7. There are such organizations as Court of Moravia (www.linkedin.com/company/court-of-moravia), Tirian which has so called business simulations in its portfolio (www.tirian.com/programs-services/dimension-1/) or for example Scenario Sciences Sweden (<http://scenarioexpertis.se>).

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Further reading

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