

## Østerskov Efterskole Edularp Conference (April 10–11, 2017)

David František Wagner

WHEN it comes to edularping, Østerskov Efterskole is a living legend. A school that uses LARP as its primary educational tool is something of a sensation in the larping world and attracts considerable interest even amongst the general public, with positive articles popping up regularly. And what is arguably the most important part of this success: it has been operating for ten years now. This kind of longevity is seldom heard of in the larping world, and it also means that the school has already amassed a great deal of feedback and has constantly been working on their method.

So, when Østerskov Efterskole announced the first year of a conference aboutLARPs in education on 10–11 April, I quickly decided to attend. In the end, the Czech Republic was represented by me and Petra Dovhunová from the Faculty of Education, Charles University, and Josef Kunderát, Jakub Doleček and Jiří Szucs from Eduludus. Still, even with a few years of experience with educational role-play we were mostly expecting to be less experienced in edularping than most attendants.

The conference was divided into two days: two rounds of lightning talks, five keynotes and four workshops, with the first day leaning more into the keynotes part and the second day being mostly about workshops. The conference was staffed mostly by the students, with guided tours of the facility being conducted during all the longer breaks.

After a short welcome and presentation of the history of Østerskov Efterskole, the first keynote began. Bart Giethoorn built his keynote on the gamification process – his theory mostly stemming from video game design perspectives (including the Super Meat Boy video) and his practical experience being grounded in a clear distinction between external and internal motivation. At the end of the keynote, he admitted coming to the conference basically to learn what edularp is. That was

quite a surprising turn of events, but the presentation connected game design and didactics very well and made for an inspiring speech.

The second keynote was prepared by Cecilie Nemeth “Pedagogy and LARP – A Work in Progress”. The presentation of the author’s recent successes and failures in introducing larping to a wider Danish environment, including aspiring teachers, brought about a surprise. Suddenly it was quite clear that while Denmark has had some big advances in the field of edularping (including the establishment last year of the second Efterskole centered on edularping and a young-adult-focused campaign called “Orcs are Coming”), there were large areas where the Danish situation felt a bit obsolete. For instance, learning that most teachers in Denmark did not even consider role-playing a worthy method was interesting, as were notions of “how to introduce more role-playing into education in this generation”, mostly by incorporating very simple, Easter Bunny style games. At the same time, there was no methodology in assessing the educational outcomes of specific role-play scenarios, being based on the assumption that role-playing is great, *per se*.

The afternoon’s Lightning talks focused on diverse topics, always based on the personal experience of different speakers. All of them felt very practical, from experiences in communicating LARP to the benefits of the edularp approach for students with special needs. In this part we also presented a short talk on Czech specifics concerning edularping.

Two similar keynotes continued the program: “Knowledge, Storytelling and Aesthetics in ‘Alice’ – A LARP Environment” by Mads Lund and “Czech Edularp Promoting Ecology and Global Thinking” by Josef Kunderát were both in-depth studies of specific projects that cited the strengths and weaknesses of their approach. Where they diverged was on a critical point of analysis – while Mads Lund focused on aesthetics and its didactic value in creating “experience” (acknowledging that merely creating experiences is not sufficient), Josef Kunderát put an emphasis on the methodology of feedback, and on measuring the change happening in the individual during the edularp.

The last activity of the first day was a workshop, led by Moyra Turkington, based on creating games from random educational topics. Afterwards, there was a communal dinner and networking.

The whole first half of the day was taken up by workshops conducted by the Østerskov staff, one of them focusing on using virtual reality and augmented reality in the classroom while playing roles (with unexpectedly solid argumentation for the themes for which this is a solid approach). The second half was much more grounded in day-to-day education as known in the Czech Republic. Apart from a number of very inspirational messages, there was also a sense of realization that even this very progressive school was mostly still leaning on similar evaluation systems and class management strategies.

The last and most academic keynote was yet to come. "Role Playing Research before Dungeons and Dragons – What Psychologists Know about the Effects" by Andreas Lieberoth presented meta-research on how role-playing has been researched as a subject and, at the same time, used as a method for research. As it included a not very well known criticism of Zimbardo's famous "Stanford Prison Experiment", the keynote of course strayed far from practical education, but managed to present a clear view of research in the 50s and 60s. It also pointed out famous articles, widely cited by edularp sympathisers, with a problematic methodology.

The second round of lightning talks presented various specific approaches, some of them verging on the edge of the term "edularp" (Hamlet exercise, using Harry Potter as a class theme in kindergarten). Two of them stood out: "Love & Interrogation", the presentation of a card game/ role-playing project meant to further enhance sexual education in the Danish school system and "When the Grass is Not Greener", presenting a case study of a Hungarian private school LARP gone wrong. With a week-long narrative about settling Mars, the school wanted to educate its students on topics ranging from biology to sociology and basic ethics. And while it succeeded in all the natural sciences, it failed in teaching students empathy and other "soft values". The main

take-away? The simulation was a bit too realistic, the situation too desperate, so the students learned that "people on the bottom may do a lot of things to stay alive – meaning I should stay away from them".

The last activity of the weekend was a workshop by David Simkins, a professor of game design from Rochester Institute of Technology. In this one, participants got to create a new educational tool based on a very short description of the goals and topics. Not only did the lecturer's tips prove extremely useful, but there was also the experience of working with teachers from different backgrounds and cultures, which was definitely an excellent way to end the conference.

And this was probably the best way to sum up an event that managed to pull in participants from all over the European Union and USA, forcing them to reassess their basic values and methodological approaches. It remains to be seen if the conference is going to be held again, but the truth is that such a thing would be beneficial to both the presentation and development of edularp in the Czech Republic.