Edu-larp Paths in Education: A Pedagogic Research on Ethnic Prejudice and Empathy through Games

Andrea Maragliano[1]

University of Genoa, Italy[1]

Abstract

The society we live in leads us to rethink education and communication languages, especially in educational processes concerning children and adolescents. It seems increasingly difficult to build meaningful educational experiences able to involve young people in transformative processes and overcome the ingrained "nihilistic sense".

The new digital paradigm and the evolving perceptions of corporeal forms bring some crucial changes we need to explore. The social science teachings need, therefore, to be renewed to better deal with knowledge and skills in an interactive environment, promoting creativity, aesthetics, global and critical thinking and to promote relevant societal change.

A possible educational method to tackle these realities can be given by the Educational Live Action Role Play (hereafter "Edu-larp"). An Edu-larp is a live role-playing game in which the narration is not only told but also played in first hand by the participants with their body and their actions. Players interact each other by interpreting a character and playing fictitious situations in a real space ("magic circle"). Despite the Edu-larp still being a growth method, several studies are highlighting its specific benefits, which include: identity exploration, communities building and cooperation, transversal skills, didactic media, problem solving, empathy, and self-awareness.

The presented study builds on the findings of an experimental research on two migration-themed Edu-larps: "Youth On The Run" which simulates the migratory journey of an asylum seeker family from Somalia to Italy for 24 hours; and "300, the battle of the tent cities" which simulates a 4-hour municipal meeting in which the participants have to decide the placement of 300 refugees arriving in their city. It aims to enquire whether both games have significant effects on the participants' empathy and ethnic prejudices. The research was conducted on 82 subjects who partook an Edu-larp, using an open-question survey, psychometric scales and Implicit Association Test (IAT). The test was iterated three times: one week before, one week after and three months after the game.

This paper will present the research design, the first reflections on the relationship between a "game for social change", and possible Edu-larp paths in future of education.

Keywords: Edu-larp, Empathy, Ethnic Prejudice, Game for Social Change, Educational Research, Intercultural Education.

1. LARP and EDU-LARP

LARP is the acronym of "Live Action Role Playing" [1]. When we speak about "Role Playing" we immediately associate it with fantasy games (e.g. Dungeons & Dragons) or with people sat in a circle interpreting different characters (e.g. Role-Playing Training). Even though these are fully-fledged types of Role Playing, there are also more pervasive and bodily types, such as Live Action Role Play.

We can define these games as a "form of game play in which participants physically embody characters within a fictional scenario for extended periods of time" [2].

In Larps, participants embody their character by physically interpreting it with their actions, performing fictitious situations in real spaces and dynamics. Confronting the two examples mentioned before, in the Tabletop Role Playing the participants can imagine being knights looking for a treasure, whereas in Larp they dress and act as knights to truly look for this treasure in a wood.

Furthermore, if in the Role-Playing Training participants sit in a circle simulating business dynamics, in the Larp they will operate in a real office, impersonating different workers in effective relationships and situations. In a Larp participants constantly embody their characters throughout the whole game flow, which can last from a few hours to whole weeks. The participants need to confirm their identities and the narrative world they co-build, creating game space (*magic circle*) with their movements, speech and emotions.

Outlining the historical roots of Live Action Role Play is complex, as they stem from various representations, such as the fake Roman naval battles, the ancient Egyptian costume feasts, the theatre field, the psychodrama and the training simulations.

Even though Live Action Role Playing is different from all these methods, not only because there is no audience or fully written scripts, but also because the participant act for their mutual benefit, so as to experience of the game thoroughly.

Larp was born from fantasy world. However, nowadays there are several implementations in didactic and socio-educational field, enough to identify this games type as a specific category: Edu-Larp (Educational Live Action Role Playing) [3].

The prefix "*Edu-*" may refer to two different processes:

1) *Educational*: these games have educational purposes, such as games for conflict management, collaborative dynamic creation, understanding of marginal groups and minorities or civic and social values education.

2) *Didactic*: these games have didactic purposes and include play experience to develop soft skills (e.g. problem solving, team working, communication…) or school disciplines teaching/learning (from history, geography and L2 language to biology or sexual education).

An Edu-larp has a structure we could describe in 5 different phases (Fig.1):

- *Ice-breaking and/or warming-up phase*: this is the group preparation phase and creation of the atmosphere. In this phase, knowledge games, energizing and preparatory activities to make the game playable and meaningful are used. The main goal is to create an open and judgement-free climate.

- *Workshops phase*: in this phase rules, restrictions and the development of the game are described. Participants start getting acquainted with their character and to the way in which to relate with others through theatrical workshops.

- *Play phase*: game development and "*run*". This is the phase in which the characters play the scene, interacting with each other and with the game.

- *Deroling phase*: the characters played in an Edu-larp are fake, but the interactions and emotions are real. This is why the game experience can trigger deep emotions or unexpected reactions, or can blur the boundaries between the person and the character (bleed in/out phenomenon). For this reason, an Edu-larp should include activities aimed at "taking the character off", so as to always grant the safety of the participants [4].

- *Debriefing phase*: debriefing constitutes the reflection and discussion phase of the experience. This is one of the main steps for a larp to be educational effectively. In fact, it is at this stage that the elaboration of the experience and its consolidation in learning can take place. Debriefing should cover the following reflection areas [5]:
  - How do you feel? (emotions, sensations, individual experience)
  - What happened? (analysis, explanation, game experience)
  - How do you link the game to reality? (abstraction, contextualization, link to reality)
  - What did you learn? (synthesis, generalization, education)
  - What if…? (hypothesis exploration)
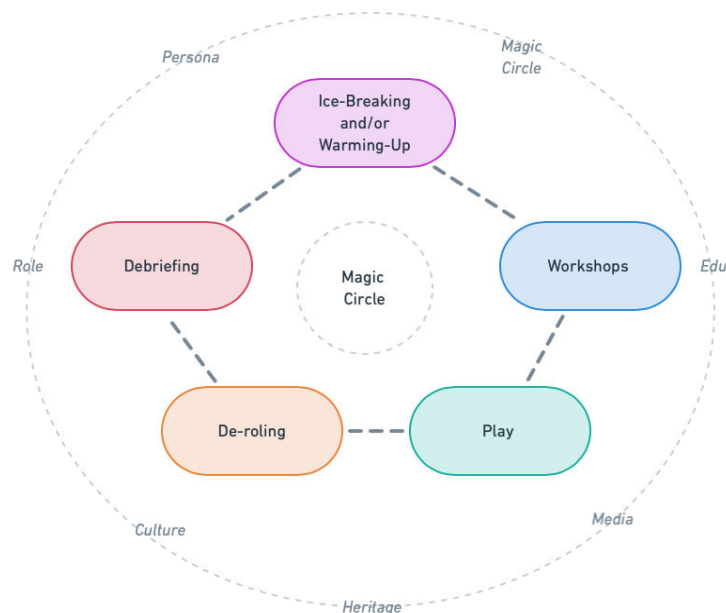 - How do we proceed? (change intentions and transformative processes)

Fig 1. Edu-Larp phases structure

2. Theoretical Framework

Why can Edu-larp be an innovative educational method? To answer this question, we have to look at the theoretical framework that underlies the game and the play.

Authors such as Bateson [6], Huizinga [7] and Callois [8] have described how reality can be seen as a form of play. Human beings explore their identities, learn language and discover the world by playing from an early stage. The game is a means and a language that ontologically belongs to humans, since everybody has played at least once in their life. The game is therefore a holistic space, which is able to merge the world with the knowledge of and us with the world.

Nonetheless, the more we grow, the more we take distance from this language. In addition, growing up humans must face systems (school, organizational, work, etc.) that increasingly fragment and separate their knowledge. Such systems are focused on providing us with a "full head" [9], where knowledge is accumulated and compressed, whilst lacking a selection and organization principle to make sense out of it. Knowledge is separation and interconnection, analysis and synthesis indeed, but our civilization and educational practices seem to be geared towards separating this phase.

To face these challenges several authors have devised teaching and learning methods that recover the holistic, transformative [10], experiential [11] [12], reflective [13] and corporeal [14] dimension that knowledge has. This seems to be extremely relevant nowadays, when having meaningful educational experiences seems to be increasingly difficult.

By the virtue of its feature, the Play can thus be a powerful educational processes facilitator able to overcome the modern pedagogical challenges. In particular, Live Action Role Playing, on account of its using elements such as body, involvement, emotions, sensations, sense of community, participation and protagonism [15] [16], can be a new teaching/learning method.

"Game Based Learning" [17] (for educational purposes) and "Game for Social Change" [18] (for educational purposes) were developed around this idea, and represent two key points of this research.

3. Case study: 300 and YOTR

The following paper will present two migration-themed edu-larp, and the research design describing the transformative impact of these games. Across two studies (represented by 2 different games) the research tests the assumption that participants who partook an Edu-larp can change their empathy and ethnic prejudice degrees and their migration phenomenon representation.

The studied Edu-larp are:

1) *Youth On The Run* (Fig. 2): Youth On The Run is an Edu-larp organised by the International Red Cross, which simulates a migratory journey from Somalia to the state where the game is played for 24 hours. In this Edu-larp, the participants play the role a of migrant family who decides to leave its country in order to achieve humanitarian asylum. The game also includes facilitators, who play the roles of different characters refugees encounter during their journey: the border guards, the military, the *passeurs*, as well as humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR. During the consecutive game phases the participants have to face several and challenging obstacles, similar to those that a migrant person has to face during his real journey. Hunger, thirst and fatigue are used to condense in the 24 hours a journey that for a migrant can last for months or years. What's more, the emotions in the game are mediated by the communication exchanges based on dehumanization and exercise of power.

Fig. 2 Youth On The Run Logo   Fig. 3 300 Logo

2) *300, the battle of the tent camps* (Fig. 3): 300 is an Edu-larp that stages the migratory experience from the viewpoint of the hosting society. In this game the participants play the role of the two small neighbouring town citizens, personally involved in the complex decisions regarding migrants hosting. Their government is about to welcome 300 migrants and asks its citizens to choose between two possible options: the first one is to create a tent camp in a plot of land in the city of Boggivera; the second option instead is to share part of the vacant housing in Mondraghelli city. Each character has different roles with different principles of interest (e.g. the priest, the industrialist, the small trader, the

activist, the farmer, the citizen already migrated...) which are played during the different municipal debate. The game is therefore based on the exercise of a democratic debate, favouring through roles the emergence of stereotypes, finally discussed in the debriefing phase.

4. Research Design and Method

To describe the possible Edu-larp impact we asked 146 participants (100 female; 46 male; M_{age}=29,68 years, SD=11.00) to answer an online survey to explore their possible empathy and ethnic prejudice degree variation and the impact of the games (Tab. 1). We asked participants to answer the survey in 3 different times: one week before the game (T0), one week after the game (T1) and 3 months after the game (T2). A field ethnography was conducted throughout the whole game, and participants were interviewed in the debriefing part, right at the end of it (Fig. 4, Fig. 5). The study employed a 3 (game participation: Youth On The Run {54} vs 300 the battle of the tent camps {28} vs Control Group {64}) x 2 (impact: empathy vs ethnic prejudice) general linear model design, with the game participation as the between-subjects factor and the time type as the within-subjects factor. A previous pilot test was conducted involving 22 participants.
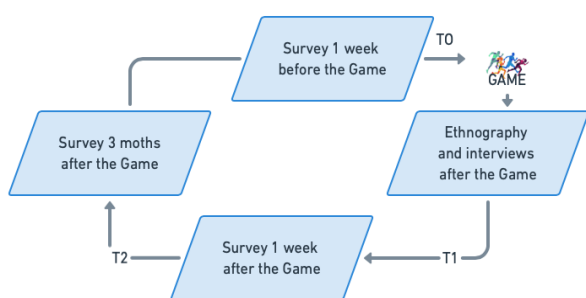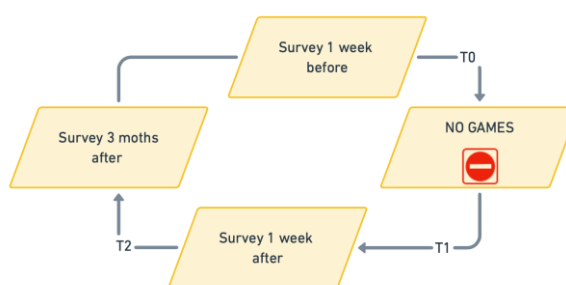

Fig. 4 Experimental group research design

Fig. 5 Control group research design

TOPIC	TOOL	ANALYSIS
EMPATHY	Inclusion of Out-group in the Self (Aaron et all, 1992) QCAE Empathy Scale (Batson et all, 2016) Prosocial Behaviour Scale (Penner et all, 1995)	- Repeated measures ANOVA (to test T0, T1 e T2 differences within-subjects) - One-way ANOVA *between-subjects* (to test the YOTR, 300 and Control Group differences between-subjects) - Normal distribution analysis (with statistic normalization and bias manipulation check) - IAT analysis according to Greenwald's scoring algorithm (2003). - Univariate and multivariate analysis (to test couple or group variable correlations) - Text semantic analysis of ethnography, survey open questions and interviews (through a posteriori text coding)
ETHNIC PREJUDICE	Attitude Thermometer (Alwin, 1997) Implicit Association Test – IAT (Greenwald, Nosek & Banaji, 2003)	
PLAY EXPERIENCE	Ethnographic Observation Free Associations at Stimulation Words Immersive Tendencies Scale (Newman, 2005) PANAS Scale (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988)	
GAME'S IMPACT	Ethnographic Observation Open question survey Interviews	
Statistical Analysis Software: SPSS, Jamovi || Semantic Analysis Software: NVIVO 10		

Tab. 1 Research tools and analysis

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Although this research is still ongoing and has yet to be finalized, the first partial analyses may show some trends. Migration-themed Edu-larp participation appear to have a significant effect on empathy and prejudice degree. This effect size strength appears to depend on the game's mechanic/dynamic features. Mechanics/dynamic more oriented towards bodily sensations and intense relationships (as in Youth On The Run game) seem to have a more marked influence on the degree of empathy. More argumentative, debating and acting-oriented mechanics/dynamics (as in 300 game) seem to be having a greater impact on ethnic prejudice degrees. Knowing which types of mechanics and dynamics support which transformative changes is heuristically interesting for different areas: didactic, educational and game design.

If we give value to the possibilities Edu-larps offer, it is fundamental to be aware of its operating principles. Knowing *which* game elements may guarantee *what* type of impact and building shared guidelines on it could support both game literacy [19] and educational design [20].

In this way, we could enrich the actions of the future game designers, teachers and social workers who want to use Edu-larp in their didactic and educational projects.

Asking what are the new paths in the future of education also entails asking what strategies and tools we have in order to evaluate their meaningfulness and effectiveness, to really understand if we are on a significant path.

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