

# Report from “Larp Studies Seminar” 2017

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The “Larp Studies Seminar” took place on the 29 April as a part of the Pyrkon Convention 2017 in Poznań, Poland. Created as a venue for international academic debate on the subject of live action role-playing, the seminar was organised by Polskie Towarzystwo Badania Gier (Games Research Association of Poland)<sup>1</sup>; Klub Fantastyki “Druga Era” (i.e. the organisers of Pyrkon); the Institute of Applied Linguistics at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań; and the Institute of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz.

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<sup>1</sup> The official website: <http://www.PTBG.org.pl>.

The official website of the event reads as follows:

The discussion of larp as a medium, entertainment, form of art, and social phenomenon has been developed for the last 20 years. It was initiated by the larping community in the Nordic countries, in which the international exchange of ideas, practices and theories has focused mainly on the Knutepunkt/Solmukohta convention, held annually since 1997. Shaped primarily by practitioners (designers, writers, organisers, players, drama educators), the Nordic larp discourse was co-created by academicians, it utilised academic theories, and it has itself influenced scholarly research worldwide. The multimodal and multi-faceted nature of larp requires an interdisciplinary approach, which is reflected in publications from many fields of humanistic and social studies, and even some within the sciences (e.g. systems science).

The need for research on live role-playing has increased significantly in recent years, when larp became a part of well-established industries such as tourism, education, event organisation, experience design, and media entertainment. In fact, it has become an industry of its own, with an increasing number of publications, awards, grant projects and specialist conferences. The rapid growth, professionalisation and public recognisability of this form of art timed with the rise in scholarly research on non-digital role-playing (and with the appearance of larp-related courses in academic curricula). Papers on larp have regularly been published in *International Journal of Role-Playing*, *Analog Game Studies*, and *Wyrd Con Companion*, and presented at conferences dedicated to game studies, such as “DiGRA RPG Summit” and “CEEGS”, only to mention the most important ones.

Speakers invited to the “Larp Studies Seminar” have a double expertise as larp specialists, combining the rigour of academic research with an extensive practical experience as larp creators. They all have made significant contributions to the larp literature, and now they will discuss the current state of “larpology” and its prospects of future development (Pyrkon.com, 2017).

**Dr. J. Tuomas Harviainen** (Hanken School of Economics, Finland) in his talk “Designing for Awesomeness, or Designing for Experiences?” discussed the recent trends in commercial and non-commercial larp design, including the increasing professionalisation, documentation, serialisation, and accessibility efforts.

**Prof. Annika Waern** (Uppsala University, Sweden) followed the same thread in “Genre Shifts as Larp Goes Mainstream”, approaching the topic from the perspective of activity design. She drew attention to the problems of aligning multiple elements in larp: story, mechanics, players and designers, both in-game and off-game, which she demonstrated on the examples of *Inside Hamlet* and *College of Wizardry*.

**Dr. Rafael Bienia** (Maastricht University, Netherlands) in “Future Larp Design, Research and Practice: Towards Next Generations of Role-playing” called for a better integration of larp research and design practice in the search for innovation. He discussed several successful and failed attempts at innovating in larps, as well as the underutilised and frequently unrealised potentials of small details such as age gaps between players.

**Dr. Yaraslau Kot** (Belarussian State University, Belarus) in “Larp Research in the ex-USSR Region” presented an overview of the Russian-speaking research on role-playing games and activities, which dates as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was developed extensively in the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras as an institutionalised approach to education and therapy.

**Mgr Piotr Milewski** (Kazimierz Wielki University, Poland) in “Everyday Larping – Designing Larps for Non-gamers” reached for Wolfgang Walk’s DDE model and his own professional experience to lay down a framework for the design of role-playing games for non-gamers, such as museum visitors looking for a low-entry level entertainment – and without character sheets.

**Mgr Krzysztof Chmielewski** (Kazimierz Wielki University, Poland) in “How (Not to) Kill the Cat – Larpcraft vs. Creativity in Larp Design Teaching” shared his experiences from three years of teaching larp design to freshman students of Game Studies & Design. In his view, the most successful approach consisted in small-format lab exercises testing a variety of design ideas, with the paramount importance of designing for meaningful choice.

**Dr. Augustyn Surdyk** (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland) and **Dr. Jerzy Szeja** (Games Research Association of Poland) in “Reflections of Practitioners. Students Taking Part in School Larps in the Years 1999–2017 and Their Transformations” focused on changes in the attitudes of students who played larps run by their teacher (Dr. Szeja) in a Polish high-school. Over the span of 18 years, it has been increasingly easy for students to grasp the idea of larp and to immerse in fantasy worlds, whereas their interest in (and knowledge of) historical periods has been on the decline. Other increasing trends were the prioritisation of in-character personal goals over collective/social ones, and winning the game over immersing in the play. Also, an after-hours school larp would attract more students 15 years ago than it does now, slowly losing competition with other forms of entertainment.

**Dr. Michał Mochocki** (Kazimierz Wielki University, Poland) chaired the panel discussion “Academic Larp Studies: Methods & Approaches”, its aim being to debate the current state and delineate the future of larp research. In the search for the methodological identity and scope of larp studies, the panel was asked two major questions, or in fact one question in two variations:

1. “Do we need academic **larp studies** as a separate field”, distinguished from studies on tabletop and online roleplaying? There seems to be a universal agreement that:

- larp deserves its own subfield of academic enquiry;
- larp studies should be informed by game studies and play studies;
- larp studies is open for various methodologies, depending on the needs of specific research;

2. „Do we need **academic** larp studies as a separate field”, distinguished from the non-academic theory and practical considerations developed in the community?

- non-academic larp criticism is highly valuable for academic researchers;
- scholars may also develop valuable larp theory without first-hand practical experience;
- larp studies as a field benefits from constant exchange of ideas between scholars and practitioners;
- actually, it is typical of larp scholars to be both academics and practitioners (players, designers, educators);
- the academic is often inseparable from the practical, especially in the discussion of design.

Another set of questions concern the future of “Larp Studies Seminar” as an event, if it is to be continued. Should it keep its focus on larp, or broaden its scope to include tabletop and online role-playing? Should it stay strictly academic, or start inviting non-academic speakers? Should it stay associated with the Pyrkon Convention, become part of the annual GRAP conference on the “Culture-Generative Function of Games” cycle<sup>2</sup>, or seek an independent life of its own?

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<sup>2</sup> The official website of the cycle: <http://www.gry.konferencja.org>.

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