

Teaching German Literature Through Larp: A Proposition

Popular abstract: German Studies as a discipline aims to make the form and content of its literary heritage relevant to today's undergraduate student. Yet traditional teaching methods of lecture and reading aloud do not emotionally engage them. Literature-based larps such as *A Nice Evening with the Family* (2007) and *Inside Hamlet* (2015) emotionally engage their participants with – and make an argument about – the major themes of their source texts, yet are too logistically complex for the modern university setting. Recent developments in nano-games and freeform, however, permit us to design games that directly address the scale and tight focus needed for the undergraduate foreign-language literature classroom. This article contends that games can be used to interpret literature in comparable ways to an analytic essay, and discusses two nano-games based on German literature already developed by University of Cincinnati students in Spring 2016: *Unrequited* (2016), an adaptation by Sarah B. of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1775) by J.W.G. Goethe, and *Babble-On* (2016), an adaptation by Ashton D. of Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mothertongue* (1990). These games exhibit specific interpretations of the texts in question, inviting students to interact with those interpretations, and then emotionally react to both the games and the texts themselves.

Evan Torner

University of Cincinnati
evan.torner@gmail.com

Live-action role-playing games (larps) have recently spawned a sub-genre of game designed and suitable for the classroom environment, also known as “edu-larp.” Edu-larps can teach history and science lessons, and open students’ eyes to meta-level discussions of course content (Bowman 2014, Chen 2016). In addition, such games foster emotional engagement with the material, as students grapple with the affect-laden incentives and opportunities for empathy that edu-larps provide (Brown and Morrow 2015).

German Studies in the United States, meanwhile, has an urgent mandate to “offer a hands-on experience of [German] literature that is different from that encountered in lectures and teacher-directed seminars” (Schewe and Scott 2003, 76; Koerner 2012). Edu-larps as German literary adaptations are thus positioned to fill an important gap in German Studies for the 21st Century, as well as remaining in continuity with past German second-language acquisition pedagogy. This article presents the case of edu-larp literary adaptations as emotional system design for the German foreign-language classroom here in the United States. This work taps into my own history with larp adaptations, the pedagogical usefulness of the recent freeform nano-game design movements, and the two German literary edu-larps developed by my students based on J.W.G. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 2001) and Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* (1990).

In a recent post “How Board Games Got Literary” on Lithub, Tobias Carroll (2015) discusses the many recent entries of literary adaptations to be found

among board and games, including *Enter the Passage* (2012) and *Moby-Dick, or, The Card Game* (2013). As the range of expression of such board games increases, game designers have found much in the human literary heritage to offer. Where and how do role-playing games (RPGs) fit into this schema? The larp community has certainly expanded its range of expression into literary adaptation: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) books in *College of Wizardry* (2014-); Ibsen, Strindberg and Vinterberg in *A Nice Evening with the Family* (2007); Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in *Last Voyage of the Demeter* (2014-); and Charlie Jane Anders' *Six Months, Three Days* (2011) in the 2-person RPG *183 Days* (2015). Each of these larps offer high-quality experiences that parallel and amplify those of their original source material.

Few of the aforementioned games have suffered the inevitable book-to-film adaptation problem – namely, that the latter pales in comparison to the former (Hutcheon 2006). Rather, players continue to engage with the literary material months or years after the event. For example, players of *Inside Hamlet* (2015) publicly debate the relationship of tragedy and politics to one another, as manifested in the larp (Räsänen 2016). Literature-based larps invite emotional engagement with the source texts, as well as intrinsic motivation to analyze them more in-depth (Vanek and Peterson 2016). Since Espen Aarseth (1997) christened digital games “ergodic literature” and Daniel Mackay (2001) dubbed RPGs a “new performing art” nearly two decades ago, how do we integrate this often-messy, system-based,

literary-aspirant artform into teaching foreign-language literature and its interpretation? The answer: by teaching both the game adaptations of the texts and the student responses to those adaptations as interpretation too.

German Studies, my own discipline, has been deploying games to teach language and culture since the 1970s: the “Spiel- und Sportfest” once hosted by New Mexico State University (Delisle 1983) and Catherine Johnson’s “Chaos auf dem Marktplatz” (Johnson 2007) constitute just a few of many examples. German textbooks are rife with role-playing activities (“*Rollenspiele*”) to reinforce grammar and culture lessons. Yet many bridges remain to be built. On the one hand, German Studies has scarcely gotten wind of the edu-larp community, let alone the art larp scene: teaching German through drama exercises is still seen as cutting edge (Koerner 2012). On the other hand, both edu-larp and art larp focus their literary efforts on popular works from the Anglophone sphere – e.g., Melville, Shakespeare, Rowling – reinforcing dominant paradigms surrounding what we call “literature.” Language-acquisition luminary Claire Kramsch herself comments on the fundamentally intercultural act of foreign-language acquisition and the objective of reducing student anxiety in the *language* classroom (Kramsch 1993). Why then do we abandon such a philosophy of intercultural play for the foreign-language *literature* classroom?

Teaching a German literary overview the past two years (2014-2015) has instructed me that there are several major hurdles to be overcome in student understanding of the material. Students tend to lack historical knowledge of anything prior to within a decade of their childhood; intrinsic language-learning skills to note passages not understood and record vocabulary; the tools one uses for literary analysis; and the emotional engagement with – or why one should care at all about – the texts themselves. In previous semesters, students have enjoyed vocabulary study-skill sessions as well as my dry historical overview lectures as I frantically tried to catch them up to speed. My objectives were, among others, to make sense of the literary periods of Romanticism or the New Objectivity, or render intelligible the angst of the Cold War. But such overviews presume that the text itself is already “enchanted” with student emotion, which I found to be not the case at all. Thus I now turn to RPGs as their own form of literary analysis intended to excite the imaginations of the students (Bowman 2014; Vanek and Peterson 2016).

Games and technology are not neutral objects (Kranzberg 1986; Kelly 2010). We cannot claim that

games remain above rhetorical positions or arguments about specific texts or aspects of human society (Bogost 2008). For this reason, I have artificially separated my game design work since 2010, largely based on German film and literature, from my teaching as a German scholar. My rationale to do so was the following: my game design for me served as a space of radical self-expression about the work in question and games in general, rather than a sterile climate in which to fulfill learning objectives.

For example, *Metropolis* (2011) was my interpretation of the Expressionist cinema and theater movement, holding that physical group dynamics could trump the interiority of characters any day. *Posthuman’s Progress* (2013) brought *Run Lola Run* (1998) into dialog with the whimsical processes of improvisation; Lola can transcend the boundaries of human temporality, just as players can transcend the boundaries of pre-determined game roles and consequences. *The City of Fire & Coin* (with Epidiah Ravachol 2013) empowered the players to be awesome pulp fantasy characters, while also reveling in the strangeness and emergent effects of having a city full of them. I did not bring such games into my teaching out of personal self-defense from a litigious culture and my general awkwardness about having my students participate in my artform. That time has now passed.

With my research on RPG and literary studies continuing apace (Torner and Jara 2017) and inspirational edu-larps such as those by Kaisa Kangas, Anna Westerling, Malik Hyltoft and many others, German literary analysis can embrace edu-larp as a tool. This tool can both introduce *emotion* as a viable pedagogical element (Robinson 2005), as well as have students advance and debate arguments via the medium of nano-games, or short freeform larps that take under an hour (Miller 2015). Recent years have seen the rise of game collections such as the Golden Cobra (2014-), *#feminism* (2016) and the 200 Word RPG Challenge (2015-) that provide examples for how to make edu-larps that are short, yet flexible with regard to player count and still offer a complete game experience. Because I also teach a Game Studies course with some German majors, I challenged a few students to design edu-larps based on German literature using the above collections as their examples. Their games proved to me that we can indeed argue about the meaning of German literature edu-larps designed with different points in mind.

My first example of student-generated larp materials is a nano-game by Sarah B. called *Unrequited* based on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Part of the *Sturm und Drang* movement in German literature, Goethe’s

Sorrows is about a sensitive young writer named Werther who gets caught up in a love triangle with Lotte and Albert, choosing to commit suicide in the end rather than endure the torment of his desire for Lotte. The rules for B.'s game are as follows (translated from the German):

One of three prompts for everyone.
Everyone stand up.

- Your name is Albert. Go up to someone who is standing by themselves. If they say a compliment ask them to marry you.
- Your name is Lotte. Stay where you are, if someone comes to up to you give them a compliment. If they ask you to marry them say yes. Stay next to that person.
- Your name is Werther. Find a person who is engaged. Tell them you are madly in love with them and if they don't love you back, you will have to eventually kill yourself. Stand next to them.

** The End – The game is over when everyone is in a group of three. If you are left out, you will either find someone or die alone.

This admittedly brutal game is on the surface a simple sorting algorithm similar to *Pit* (1904) and other classic games: find the right people and then arrange yourselves into groups. Werther players will find themselves wandering around aimlessly until couples form, and then they will wind up standing nearby and sad, contemplating suicide. Albert and Lotte players may or may not see their characters land in a happy relationship, but are just following orders and expectations in society anyway. In less than five minutes and in a foreign language, the players of this game have also experienced an exceedingly cynical summary of the story's content. The interpretation aligns with a 19th century nihilistic view of Werther's situation: that the characters cannot help what they do, and that they will succumb to the malignant will of the world. That the game ends before Werther's suicide makes it all the more interesting, as Werther's interiority and vanity manifest themselves in bitter sulking outside of the couple that has excluded him. This symbolic representation is experiential, somatic, and based on presence.

The lack of safety mechanics and general asymmetries of the nano-game aside, *Unrequited* represents the content of the story without too much overhead or intellectual investment on the part of the players. Nevertheless, emotions provoked by the game

are undeniable. They have players invest in not only reading the original text with more interest and allying with certain characters, but also in critiquing the argument advanced by the game with respect to the source material. In this respect, players of the game are to examine it *laterally* as adaptation rather than *vertically* within a hierarchy of texts; there is no "original" that has primacy over its adaptation, only two texts that speak to each other on equal terms (Hutcheon 2006). B.'s nano-game engages not only with Werther, but also with love-triangle clichés. The reproduction of sad love triangles throughout the room is itself an aesthetic act in dialog with the literature the students will then discuss.

My second student-generated example is called *Babble-On*, by Ashton D. The game is based on Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*, a book by a Turkish-German author about the fluidity of language and identity. In the game, students are to divide themselves into groups of 3-5, with at least 4 groups represented. Each group then rapidly invents a family life in accordance with a series of questions (in German, of course): "What was home life like? Who are you in relation to one another?" After five minutes of spontaneous family creation, families are divided up so that members are meeting each other.

Once the game begins, each player will be able to use a noun only once, so words like "brother" and "sibling" are quickly exhausted. Players write down all the nouns they use up and continue to meet other families. Then, the scene cuts to Camp Patois, where people from all the different families intermingle and decide with whom they feel the most affinity by the end of ten minutes, losing their language all the while. The game is followed by a debrief, in which players talk about their feelings and begin to present their interpretation.

Very much in dialog with language-centered freeform games such as *Sign* (2015) and *Dialect* (2015) by Kathryn Hymes and Hakan Seyalioglu, *Babble-On* portrays a society threatened by the encroaching meaninglessness of speech and potentially redeemed by spontaneous communities formed at Camp Patois, where one presumes people will begin to invent new words to replace the ones they have lost. Özdamar's text meditates on the loss of identity when one adopts a foreign tongue and how one begins to recall experiences from one language in another. Leslie Adelson (2005) has argued that Özdamar's texts help shed the nationalist tales one tells about cultural loss and national assimilation, preferring instead a transnational, trans-linguistic positionality. *Babble-On* holds that the family unit is the primary site where national and linguistic identities are formed,

and that communities beyond the family unit and with an eye toward the fluidity of language and cultural exchange are the future. German students not only have to invent new word constructions in a foreign language to talk about themselves and their families, but they can situate their own alienation as beginning language learners with immigrants and exiles from other linguistic communities struggling to find the terms for their new existence in other cultures. In other words, *Babble-On* is an edu-larp designed for empathy (Brown and Morrow, 2015), intended more to convey the feelings evoked by Özdamar's text than precise passages.

Suffice to say, these student-generated games constitute the mere beginning of a larger program. In the Fall, I will be teaching an overview of German literature class that introduces all of the texts spanning the German literary canon via nano-games. Eventually, this collection of classroom-ready materials shall be refined and transformed into a publishable book intended for the German Studies community much as Peter Yang's *Modern German Plays* (2015) or Reimer, Zachau and Sinka's *German Culture Through Film* (2005).

From this vantage point, edu-larp design for the advanced German literature classroom participates in a much larger tradition of integrating other media and role-playing exercises into the foreign-language classroom. The difference with these games, however, is twofold. One dimension is that students can see *adaptation* and *argumentation* as valid uses for games, and that one can then position oneself on either side of a debate regarding a specific game argument. The other dimension is that the students have had their emotions pricked by the edu-larps before they even confront the text itself, inviting engagement with the issues and voices that resound across the printed page: to bring not only literature, but literary argumentation in a second language, to life.

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BIO

Evan Torner (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts Amherst) is Assistant Professor of German Studies at the University of Cincinnati. He has primarily contributed to the field of game studies as co-founder and co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Analog Game Studies*, co-organizer (with David Simkins) of the Role-Playing Games Summit at DiGRA 2015, and co-editing (with William J. White) the volume *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Role-Playing and Participatory Media* (McFarland, 2012). He organized the Pioneer Valley Game Studies Colloquium in 2012, and helps organize JiffyCon, Games on Demand, Living Games, and larp events around the world.