

Playing With The Fictitious “I”: Early Forms of Educational Role-playing in Hungary, 1938-1978

Abstract: In this article we interpret Eszter Leveleki’s special vacation program at Bánk, Hungary, as an organization, and present it in terms of contingency theory. As a background, we introduce the context, strategy, and structure behind Bánk that brought remarkable behaviors to life during its existence, prevailing in politically repressive regimes for almost its entire history. The article qualitatively analyzes available sources, the recollections of those who took part in the vacation program, mainly from the ‘50s to the ‘70s, and diaries written on site in order to determine what forms of transformative play were present at Bánk that established a unique heritage of educational role-playing in Hungary. We go through all the identifying elements and themes and show how Bánk was a fertile soil for more complex forms of play to emerge. We compare our results with different definitions of role-playing and child’s play in general in order to determine to what extent the more complex forms of play at Bánk can be called larp, what key characteristics of it might differ from those of larp, and whether these differences serve a certain purpose.

Keywords: Bánk, educational larp, camps, democracy, heritage, Hungary

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hungary’s long-lived underground tradition of several-weeks-long summer camps for children currently takes the form of full-fledged edu-larps in which campers between the age of 10 and 18 become the citizens of fantasy kingdoms. However, this tradition mainly originates in Eszter Leveleki’s private vacation program that took place on the lake-side of Bánk from 1938 to 1978. In its 40 years of existence it operated under oppressive regimes. The Bánk tradition represents a lineage of live-action role-playing completely independent of the *D&D*-based Western canon.¹

The later decades of the summer vacations are well documented. The recollections of former vacationers were published from the ‘90s onward (Farkas 1992; Dávid et al. 2017). Their anecdotes and the contemporary diaries written on site provide the corpus of this qualitative study. The goal is to determine what more complex forms of playing appeared and evolved in the original manners of the Bánk tradition throughout its existence of 40 years, whether it can be compared to larp, and in that case what characteristics differentiate it from a larp and why did those evolve that way.

There has not been any thorough research on the topic, especially not in English (see Frazon 2015) which opens up the possibilities of further in-depth studies, particularly comparing it to other educational role-playing traditions.

2. BACKGROUND

The Bánk vacation program could be considered an organization, as it was a sovereign system of people and objects, with a permanent goal, clear boundaries, a formal hierarchy and purposeful rules (Hodgson 2006, 18). Basic information about Bánk camp is presented in contingency theory terms that are still used in organizational analysis. According to contingency theory, in simplified form, the external and

¹ We are aware that a comparison to participatory practices used in the Soviet Union in both propaganda and pedagogy would be possible; however, the scope of the research so far has not allowed it yet to make this comparison.

internal environment impacts the organization's strategy, strategy impacts organizational structure, structure impacts organizational behavior, and behavior impacts performance (Donaldson 2001). Key information about Bánk is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Bánk as a quasi-organization in terms of contingency theory.
Authors' creation based on Dobák and Antal (2010, 42),

| |
|---|
| <p>Environment (external & internal) Political oppression (far-Right & far-Left) Intellectual circles of the capital, participants predominantly from Jewish background From 6 to 14-year-olds</p> |
| <p>Strategy Quasi democratic environment Developing the individuum through living in a community Individual transformation</p> |
| <p>Structure From beginning of July until end of August, several weeks away from family Hierarchy: Eszter Leveleki > Room chiefs > Cubs, Bears, & Witches Quasi democratic</p> |
| <p>Behavior 1938 - 49: Physical activities 1949 - 56: World building - creating the mythology of Pipecland through play 1956 - 78: Creating cultural artifacts built upon the tradition and mythology of Pipecland</p> |
| <p>Performance Transformative experiences Later famous artists Two main lineage of successor camps</p> |

Leveleki's vacation program at Bánk had been going on for four decades, between 1938 and 1978. Arguably the most critical factor in its external environment is that Bánk had to prevail in politically repressive regimes for almost its entire history. Geographically, it was located on the outskirts of Bánk, a small settlement near a lake about 60 kilometers north of the capital, Budapest. The area was originally a rural environment with houses without water and heating. Over time, the area was parceled out and filled up with buildings. By the 1970s, the lake had become a popular tourist destination for locals and residents of the capital.

The internal environment of the camp, i.e., the participants, were mainly children aged 6-14 (occasionally younger, aged 3-4) from the capital, from an intellectual background, and often of Jewish origin.

Eszter Leveleki's "strategy," as she and others recall (Farkas 1992, Dávid et al. 2017), was to create a kind of miniature middle-class quasi-democracy for the children, where the individual could develop through living in a strong community. This strategy was, as one might assume, antithetical to the socialist regime's ideals.

The structure of the organization and the camp served these aims. The camp was organized

during the summer, running from the beginning of July until the end of August. Its hierarchy was transparent: camp leader Eszter Leveleki and the camp staff were at the top. Below her were the room chiefs, who were former vacationers above the age of 14, and below them the vacationers. The younger boys were called Cubs, the older ones Bears, and the girls Witches.” All the vacationers were given nicknames that were almost uniquely used only within the Bánk community. The children were given a say in how they lived their lives at their own level: what they liked to eat and did not, what to play with, etc. Leveleki showed a strong preference of the children acting in a “boyish” manner, regardless of their genders, and did not really tolerate behavior that was traditionally considered feminine, such as wearing skirts, make-up, devoting extra time to hair, nails, or skin care.

Behavior at the camp became more complex and nuanced as the war era ended; gradually a particular Bánk tradition emerged including their own myths, particular use of language, artifacts, and the betwixt and between space of the Bánk vacations, which we will discuss in the Results section.

In contrast to behavior at Bánk, performance refers to the long-term accomplishments and real-life impact of the vacation program in terms of Leveleki’s “strategy.” It is worth noting that most Bánk participants described it as a radically life-changing experience, even in cases when they had only attended one session. Generations of famous artists, e.g., theater actor-director Tamás Ascher and composer-conductor Iván Fischer, and cultural elites have subsequently emerged from among the participants. Bánk essentially ended with the retirement of its founder, but the tradition lives on today in the form of numerous successor camps. After 1978, when Pipecland -- the fictional kingdom of which all vacationers were citizens -- ended, many of the former vacationers created their vacation programs. These days there are around 20 summer camps that sprouted out of Bánk’s legacy. The most spread out amongst them is the lineage of the Ring Camps originally established by Péter Rákos and János Mácsai. These camps by the end of the ‘80s took the form of fully-fledged edu-larps (Túri and Hartyánci 2022).

3. THEORY

Famous observations of children’s free play and its development, like those from Jean Piaget and Mildred Parten, have been criticized and revisited in the last decades (Rubin 1979). Annika Waern (2021) characterized Swedish 7-9-year-old kids’ free play by three features: play is constantly *negotiated*; actual in-character role-play *interaction* rarely happens for long; and most of the play can be described as imitative, dramatic, or *pretend play*.

Generally speaking, pretend play starts after the first birthday of a child (Fein 1981). Evidence suggests that, contrary to common beliefs, pretend play before age six is generally grounded in reality, strongly preferring ordinary imaginary elements to fantastic ones (Harris 2021). However, this previously ad hoc solo activity gradually develops into “durable preplanned counterfactual worlds, explicitly incorporating normative rules, social intentionality, and collective negotiation” that can help the child “anticipate unknown future real events” (Kapitany et al. 2022, 7). Pretend play serves crucial adaptive evolutionary functions (Lillard 2017) and thus, can set the stage for later transformative experiences. Recently it was proposed that the variance in complex pretend play could be best described by two factors: the level of physical embodiment and cognitive engagement (Kapitany et al. 2022, 9). The following research attempts to describe how much pretend play at Bánk goes beyond that of the literature.

4. METHOD

Data collection: In the first, exploratory phase of our research on role-play in Bánk we decided to work with already existing sources. We collected every publicly available book that contained memoirs or

recollections about playing in Bánk. After reading through these sources, we decided to contact the Leveleki Eszter Foundation to assess their private archive, especially the written memoirs. *Table 2* details the data items in the data corpus.

Table 2: Data corpus of the research

| Item | Date | Type | Description |
|------|------------|-------------------------|---|
| #01 | 1992 | book (recollections) | <i>Leveleki Eszter koszorúi</i> [Wreaths of Eszter Leveleki] |
| #02 | 2017 | book (recollections) | <i>Nyugodtan tegezz</i> [Call me by my first name] |
| #03 | 2015 | written oral history | From András Forgách, a former Bánk participant |
| #04 | 1943- 1976 | diaries | Written by vacationers on site from the years of 1943, 1957, 1960, 1966, 1970, 1976 – we included the diaries that were already transcribed |
| #05 | 1989 | TV interview | <i>Eszter néni</i> [Aunt Eszter] |

Data analysis: While reading through the data corpus, every text that answered the research question was included in the data set. The research question was:

- How did reframing child’s play affect Bánk’s complex play culture, and could that then be called a form of embodied role-playing akin to larp?

Qualitative analysis was carried out on these final extracts. The data were analyzed using a theoretical thematic analysis method that allows patterns to be searched and interpreted across the entire data set in a deductive way, based on a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke 2006, 83-84). In presenting the preliminary results, we have focused on the correspondences and striking discrepancies with the data expected from the literature.

5. RESULTS

In this chapter we outline the identified playful characteristics of Bánk. First of all we list the elements that technically fall into the category of child’s play. This is mostly pretend play but also includes more structured games that children of this age develop or learn organically. Even if they have formal, preset rules, kids adapt them without adults, often modify them, and play on their own. Most of these were games that could be found in any children’s camp in contemporary Hungary, such as football and other ball games, ping-pong, and button football, which is a tabletop football simulation game played with buttons.

Number war is a large-scale game, usually played between two competing factions, in which every participant wears a series of numbers on their forehead, usually written on paper. The player is defeated and eliminated from the game if an enemy can read out their numbers aloud (Túri and Hartyándi 2022). This game later became the main mechanic for resolving battles between the residents of Pipecland -- the in-game fictional kingdom of the Bánk vacationers -- and their enemies, usually played by the room chiefs, older vacationers, or occasionally by visiting former vacationers. Other

large-scale, capture-the-flag types of games were also present, however less dominant. Ribbon duel is a one-on-one type of physical combat game where two ribbons are tied onto the upper arm of the participants in a way that they are easily untied by pulling the ribbon's end. The goal of the player is to pull off their opponent's ribbons.

Figure 1: *Number War*, 1975. Photo: Fortepan / Faragó László



There were several elements that distinguish the play at Bánk from child's play elsewhere. Eszter Leveleki preferred if the children played competitive games, and even less-complex forms of play were to be taken seriously, putting vacationers under constant performance pressure. One such game was *CAPITALY*, the Hungarian version of *Monopoly* printed in 1935 and banned by the communist authorities in 1952. Some form of it with house rules was still played at Bánk later on, and most likely the simulation of the economical side of the fictitious kingdom of Pipecland was heavily based on this game. However, familiarizing children with the characteristics of open market capitalism was substantially controversial in Stalinist and Post-Stalinist era Hungary.

Elements that went beyond child's play also originated in child's play. With the expected seriousness of playing, the encouragement, and facilitation from an adult authority figure, Leveleki elevated it to the level of traditions: gamified and ritualized routines; special events and celebrations; playful language and neologisms.

From the early years on, traditions were created. The accumulation of cultural artifacts started to form a well-defined subculture of the vacationers, a kind of alternate reality experienced fully only during the summer weeks of the vacation, fed both on reality and in-game fiction. It was represented both on a physical and verbal level. Many neologisms were created, through creative, playful use of language, such as *tradomány* - the combination of the worlds *tradíció* and *hagyomány*, roughly translatable as the combination of tradition and heritage: *traditage*. However, its meaning for Bánk is much more complex than the combination of the two words. It means the continuation of something – mythology, memory, mystery, ritual – the elements that form identity; nevertheless it is free for reiteration, reform and, via play, new meaning creation.

The most prominent physical representations of these “traditages” – souvenirs from major game events – were put on display on the “Totem Wall” in Bánk. These items were constant reminders for the vacationers of their group identity; simultaneously they were exposed to be stolen by the enemies of Pipecland, providing further accumulation of history related to objects, thus further reiteration of their meanings.

Gamified and ritualistic elements framed both the everyday existence and special events at Bánk. The “Like-It-Or-Not” tabella allowed all children to list one food that they will not eat, while adding another one that they will get double portions of. The serving of semolina pudding – which was often on the menu – was always introduced with a small ritualistic poem, and vacationers were asked to choose sides whether they preferred the meal with cacao powder sprinkled on the top or stirred into the pudding. Based on this division they improvised debates. It is somewhat reminiscent of the two Lilliputian parties Gulliver encounters during his travels – a society deeply divided over the question on which end an egg should be cracked open – thus formulating a critique of false divisions in society.

Special events include the Anna Ball that took place each year on the 26th of July. It originated in the Hungarian tradition of pageant balls held at the same time around the lake Balaton since 1825. It was the only such event that was held during the communist era as well. It focused mostly on the performance of the vacationers. Based on the available sources in the early years there were more treasure hunt-like game experiences, while in the last period it is well documented that the focus shifted to actual theater and opera performances done in a funny, parodistic way, but prepared and performed in a serious manner. This event was open for former vacationers to visit, thus providing a meeting point for the wider Bánk community.

Another similar event was the 20th of August, which is the most prominent Hungarian national holiday, the one of the establishment of the country of Hungary, and of the new bread. A special meal of milk loaf with hot chocolate was served on this day, possibly a spin on the notion of the “new bread.” The entry in the diary of this day was always written by the room chief of the Bears.

In 1960, Leveleki and the room chiefs were worried that the children were too occupied with their favorite football teams from the capital, creating rifts within the vacationers. The room chiefs came up with the solution that everyone in Pipecland has to root for the football team of the neighboring Karancslapujtő that was on the lower end of the third league tabella. Legend says that, as the vacationers kept showing up at the match of the team with signs encouraging the players, they started to perform better and better. However, what certainly happened was that a kind of friendship evolved between the participants of the Bánk vacations and the members of the Karancslapujtő football team that deepened throughout the years and the fandom of this football team became a cornerstone of the Bánk identity.

Another ritualistic moment in the life of the Bánk vacations was the moment of farewell, marking the end of a season with a goose feather given to by Leveleki and a speech delivered by a room chief or fellow vacationer to each participant. This practice created collectible items that also served as a way of counting for how many years they had been taking part in this shared experience that the children proudly kept records of.

There are entries on trials being held at Bánk; however they were rather parodistic and mocking in their nature. Even if their outcomes were somewhat humiliating for the accused, they tended to fall more on the benevolent side.

Creative endeavors became more prominent in the later period of Bánk (1957-76). A vast variety of arts and media were used with a serious approach, while still cherishing childish and imperfect aesthetics. They served not only as forms of self-expression of the children, but also as group identity forming elements. Theater pieces were created with great care, mostly parodies and satires. There were examples of completely improvised plays. Sometimes these plays theorized the “origin” of elements encountered by the children in-game, thus serving as myth creation within the fictional world.

Opera was a popular genre amongst the children of the late period of Bánk. They mostly consisted of musical parodies of well-known themes and adaptation of familiar tales. Once an opera was successful it became part of the repertoire and might have been performed year after year. One such piece was for example based on the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

Bánk had its own newspaper – according to the archives at least from the early ‘50s on – called *Bánki Béka Brekegi* (Bánk’s Frog Croaks). It was a one-pager created by the children that reflected upon the daily happenings of their vacation, the matches played by the football team of Karancslapujtó, and the in-game events, anchoring them by creating their memory and myth.

The environment of Bánk – the isolation in time and space and the act of spending several weeks away from their family in a rural environment – helped to shape the community in itself. Throughout the years, street signs were placed in and around the house in Bánk, naming certain areas accordingly. Originally these were mostly street signs from Budapest. In a way they were holding the memories of home, while creating a betwixt and between space (Turner 1982) that is neither Bánk, nor Budapest, but both at the same time, and also none of the above, but the physical anchoring of the fictional kingdom of Pipecland.

The initial idea of Pipecland was born out of a game that the vacationers played in the 1950s where they tried out—in a social experiment fashion—how it would be to live in different countries. They simulated living in each country for a day and at the end they voted on which one they would rather live in. The winner was Denmark, a constitutional monarchy; thus they created their own fictional kingdom.

The narrative foundation and the base of further play of Bánk was created during the most fearful Stalinist period: Pipecland, the constitutional monarchy. It was a game of life-and-death, which even in the sixties would not have been completely without danger. . . (Dávid et al. 2017, 100-16)

As Pipecland was a constitutional monarchy, its king did not really have any essential role: there is only a single mention of the king in the processed sources. It was a satire on several levels: mocking the former Kingdom of Hungary that had no king between 1920-44, a farce on the current Stalinist regime, and ridiculing all the adult world with its self-important politics.

Pipecland can be interpreted as an example of a *paracosm* (Cohen and MacKeith, 1991), a “long-lasting, heavily structured, and internally consistent” inner world created by children (Bowman, 2010, 130.). However, Pipecland was co-created by Leveleki and older children, and was taken very

seriously, becoming a quasi-reality of the Bánk program, manifesting in various externalities. We think these aspects go beyond regular child's play.

On the other hand, the emotionally relatable myth of Pipecland, a fictional monarchy with its in-game hierarchy and traditions, laid the foundation of an identity through the "affective ties" (Jackson 2002) it established and as such made the way for the more complex, role-play-like form of the Grand Play.

The Grand Play was role-playing – that's what Eszter told me . . . I was so disturbed by all this that on the way home from the lake I told Eszter that I didn't understand it at all . . . She stepped out of the game and told me that it was all role-playing, like the theater, where everyone knows that there are actors on stage, but during the performance no one thinks of not taking the roles and the scenes of the drama seriously. (Dávid et al. 2017, 100-16)

The Grand Play most likely went through a natural evolution becoming more and more complex and elaborated. The participants of the Bánk vacation referred to it as role-playing (in the broadest sense of the word) but they related it to theater where everyone played their part, but following a unspoken social contract, consisting of suspension of disbelief, not breaking their roles, and avoiding to spoil their and others' fun by "peaking behind the curtains."

From the early days of Bánk we only have a few examples based on which we can tell that it was already a kind of proto-roleplaying, although it did not have the organized quality and complex characters. There was a greater emphasis on preparation – props, costumes and scenography – than on the actual play itself. Group roles appeared instead of individual roles, like being members of a fictional Native American tribe.² This sort of role-play was very common in the US and Europe in that era (Wernitznig 2007). In Hungary, the main focus of these plays was the fighting carried out through Number Wars.

We do not currently have any information from the middle period of Bánk (1949-56) regarding the Grand Play, as there are only handwritten diaries from two years (1954 and 1956) of this period. The processing of these sources could not fit into the research for this article.

In the late period of Bánk (1957-78) we found more examples of the Grand Play. The earlier examples from within this period show that these game events were often interrupted by external factors – rainy weather, lack of interest, etc. – thus it is often hard to form a complete narrative out of them. Later examples from within the period show more continuous play that went on for days. Their narratives became more complex, with several parties involved within the fiction, and their focus shifted towards diplomacy.

The narratives of these Grand Plays were based mostly on popular pulp literature of the time: Wild West stories, bandits, secret societies, etc. loaded with Orientalism and cultural appropriation. These stories did not take place in separate alternate realities, but seeped into our own reality – or rather into the liminal space of Bánk – in a very magical-realist fashion, blurring the line between reality and fiction. In this regard, Grand Plays could be considered a form of pervasive gaming (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009).

These stories, and especially the use of the language to retell them, intriguingly reflect on the reality of the Cold War Era, although it is hard to tell to what extent it was self-reflective or merely unintentional. The main element of these narratives was the attack of external enemies – often stealing memorial objects or kidnapping children – thus threatening the existence and/or the identity of Pipecland and especially of its citizens. The plots of the Grand Play were created by Leveleki and the room chiefs and their execution was also facilitated by them.

2 It's important to note that such play may be considered offensive by Indigenous Americans, even if not intended as such.

The only game mechanic used was the Number Wars, which only simulated battles between groups:

The Number War had strict rules, until suddenly saboteurs appeared with a green number that could not even be read. Often we didn't know the big boys who would suddenly appear among us and read everyone's numbers, both the ones written in red and black. (Data item #03)

In terms of props, besides the memorial objects stolen from the Totem Wall, the Grand Plays often leaned on the use of different media, like enemies or possible allies sending messages via letters, audio tape recordings or telegrams.

The main difference between the Grand Play of Bánk and most larps is the way roles were treated. Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) lists several concepts of role-playing self that can be illuminating here. All participants of the Bánk vacations were also citizens of the fictional kingdom of Pipecland, thus being present in a group role. Some of them also bore titles within this kingdom, like ministers or chamberlains, thus being present also through their social roles. The vast majority of the children did not have a well defined role; however they still had a kind of character, a fictitious "I" through which they were present throughout the vacation. This led to role identities that were very close to their real self (Doppelganger Self). This alter ego was enforced by the nickname they usually exclusively used within the Bánk community as much as by the performance pressure coming from both Leveleki and their peers.

On the one hand, we can see that participants did not consciously create a character at Bánk. Their Pipecland role was often created by magnifying a fragment of their personality, emphasizing positive or negative traits (Fragmented Self) – as evidenced by the nicknames. The pressure to perform often meant that children had to behave as the best version of themselves, conquering their fears, to be the best they could be (Idealised Self). *Klasszáság* (coolness) was expected from the children without being completely clear about what it exactly entailed. It can be summed up as being a good player, who is forthcoming, performative while being a good teammate, maintains the suspension of disbelief, and creates possibilities for others to shine. A high level of cooperation was expected from Bánk citizens, but co-creation processes like Playing to Lift (Vejdemo 2018) were not permitted to everyone. As children aged they gained more and more agency in the world building of Pipecland. Leveleki awarded a small knitted cap, *medvesapka* (bear cap) to those she found worthy, demonstrating this kind of coolness. It created a preposterous system of privileges. For example, everyone had to sit at the dining table bare-headed, except those who had bear caps could wear them then.

This lack of transparency had a certain pedagogical agenda – however a very questionable one – behind it, especially when it came to the lack of the clear boundaries between the vacationers' selves and their alter egos as citizens of Pipecland. Fear is thought to be the most powerful when it is experienced firsthand, without the safety of a well-defined character to hide behind. Leveleki's goal was to teach the children to face their fears and still be able to act. We can only theorize how this could have been a post-War, post-Holocaust, Cold War era reflex from Leveleki's side; nonetheless it remained an essential part of the Bánk tradition. One of the possible reasons why the upper limit of the vacationers age was 14 was that creating such a response of fear above a certain age is much more challenging and possibly less effective.

For the participants who were kidnapped by the enemy, the "truth" was inevitably revealed: they were initiated into the secret behind-the-scenes of the room chiefs and Leveleki, while they had to seriously maintain their roles in front of the others. As far as we can tell, the ones who got kidnapped were usually the older children, possibly in their last years as Bears or Witches.

The most complex roles were the ones of the enemies, which were reserved mostly for the room chiefs and occasionally to former vacationers or possibly external visitors. These can be regarded as full-fledged characters, with different names, personalities, speech patterns, and most likely costumes and some sorts of make-up, as it was important to keep them separate from their “normal” alter egos with which they were present every day at Bánk. However, being a good player also meant not to ruin the play of others, thus even if they recognized those who played the role of an enemy they should not have spoiled the game by revealing it to others.

Table 3 summarizes aspects and features that go beyond standard children’s play and becomes comparable to modern larp.

Table 3: Remarkable aspects of Bánk

| Child’s play | Beyond child’s play | The “Grand Play” |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical games • Football / soccer • Ping-pong • Button football • Other ball games • Number wars • Ribbon duels • Various pretend play | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing as seriously as possible • <i>Traditage</i> • Gamified / ritualized routines • Special events and celebrations • Playful language and neologisms • Making theater, opera, newspaper • The setting of Pipecland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pulp/Cold War narratives, external threat • Quasi-roles (citizen, kidnapped, enemy) • High expectations of playership • Number War as default game mechanic • Focus on negotiation and diplomacy • Totem objects • Media in service of immersion |

6. DISCUSSION

If we take Harviainen’s (2010, 176) description of larping, there are three criteria:

- Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.
- The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.
- The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters.

The Grand Play of Bánk can fit into this category, if we accept that the fictitious “I” is a sort of character, even if not a full-fledged one. However it would also mean that the children were more or less constantly in-character – due to the external and the internalized performance pressure – while they were vacationing at Bánk, probably oftentimes not even being aware of their own performativity. However, the more complex forms of playing were only a small part of the Bánk experience, even at the late period of the vacation program. Our results fit with what Bowman (2014, 118-20) describes as role-playing, as in an edu-larp, all the three types of learning – cognitive, affective, and behavioral

– happened at Bánk, although not (only) through the Grand Play, but throughout the entire span of the vacation.

According to Montola (2008), the character is the player's presence in the game world, the focal point of the player's diegesis. However in a context where the line between the diegetic and non-diegetic world is on purpose and by design blurred, a less defined character – the fictitious "I" – serves as a perfect interface through which the player can interact with the game world.

Stepping out of a larp/RPG-centered point of view, we can suspect that Grand Play was never the ultimate goal of the Bánk vacations, but only one of the facets of a transformative experience, along with team sport competitions; the formation of a subculture with its own mythologies reflected in traditions; and the use of language, artifacts, and the betwixt and between space where the experience took place. However, in its 40 years of evolution, this side strengthened and developed even further in its successor lineages to full-scale edu-larps. It is important to note that the Bánk tradition was a phenomenon organically developing for 40 years, lacking a canonized point of view or moment of reflection that would have provided a self-definition beyond the one of "children's vacation program."

7. IMPLICATIONS

The sources are the main limitation of this article. The publicly available books and memoirs of former vacationers are subjective and retrospective. Moreover, they mostly lack important details on the characteristics of play at Bánk. Documents in their archive, however – a multitude of written records, Bánk diaries, and artifacts – are partially digitized, partially hand-written. The processing of these sources for our research line has only just begun.

To continue this line of research, the first step would be to get all the Bánk diaries transcribed thus producing a full timeline through contemporary accounts, also providing more details on how more complex forms of play evolved throughout the years and how Bánk's mythology took shape. Further steps could include in-depth interviews with former vacationers at Bánk.

As at the time there were no words for role-playing; their own points of reference were more related to the nomenclature of theater. It would provide another interesting angle to analyze the phenomenon of Bánk from the point of view of avant-garde theater or general drama (Harviainen 2018, 87-88).

Furthermore, the factors of contingency theory are often discussed in pair with managerial functions (Koontz and O'Donnell 2004), as planning impacts strategy, organizing influences organizational structure, leading effects organizational behavior, and controlling enhances performance. This implies that the work of Eszter Leveleki could be analyzed from a managerial point of view to gain new insights into her leadership style and evaluate how she planned, organized, personally led, and controlled her Bánk vacation program.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study is based on the premise that the remarkable vacation program launched by Eszter Leveleki in Bánk, Hungary – prevailing in politically repressive regimes for almost its entire history – can be explained by its organizational nature, in a contingency-theory based interpretation. A qualitative, theoretical thematic analysis was carried out on diary entries made during the vacation program and later written and oral recollections. We selected excerpts that describe playing at Bánk. We looked for differences and similarities between generalized children play, larping, and Bánk.

All the elements that define Bánk – the seriousness of play; traditions; gamified or ritualized routines and special events; the playful use of language; the use of arts and media, the fictional setting of Pipecland – all nourished a special environment that enabled the creation of more complex form of play, the Grand Play, which is comparable to a larp in many aspects. However, by design, it blurred the line between the out-of-game and in-game, diegetic and non-diegetic world, in order to have a greater and more transformative impact on the players. The exact nature of this impact on the children is hard to determine based on our sources, the memoirs of the former vacationers. However Leveleki's agenda was to teach them to remain capable of acting, facing fear. The most prominent aspect reflecting it was the lack of a well-defined character, as participants were present – not only in the Grand Play, but during the entire vacation – through a Fictitious “I”: the Bánk-citizen alter ego versions of themselves.

This article is only a first step in our line of research. Further processing of the sources could provide more in depth knowledge on the evolution of the more complex forms of play at Bánk.

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