Giving "to Airy Nothing a Local Habitation and a Name": William Shakespeare's Worlds of Imagination as Accessed through a Role-Playing Game

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Abstract

For several decades, role playing games (RPGs) have enjoyed a growing popularity, not only with Western youth, but also with researchers in various academic fields. The interactive nature of RPGs, which involve participants actively in creating fictional plots and characters, makes them especially useful for exploring a given issue on several levels at once. We have attempted to verify these observations practically through a joint university and secondary-school project that introduces a group of students (age fifteen) to the atmosphere of William Shakespeare's writings and their historical-cultural context. Although the project is still in progress, its theoretical background has provided us with a series of theses that are presented in this paper. We discuss the process by which a RPG convention eases young adults into Shakespeare's works without resorting to conventional theatrical renderings or ready-made interpretations that leave little room for individual engagement with the plays. By encouraging students to remodel freely the original texts, the game fosters their creativeness and sensitivity. Simultaneously, the game acquaints participants with the metatheatrical experience of Elizabethan theater and with specific metafictional aspects of Shakespeare's plays — such as role-playing-within-a-role — which in turn can sensitize young players to the playwright's fascination with the difficulty involved in distinguishing between appearance and reality. Finally, the flexibility of RPG scenarios (1) allows students to engage in intertextual experiments with Shakespeare's plays; (2) underscores for them those aspects of the plays that tend to be marginalized in traditional classroom analyses; and (3) helps them to see in Shakespeare's works themes close to their personal and social experience (for example, ecological concerns, ethnic diversity, and gender issues). Hence, we conclude that the RPG convention can help young people of the twenty-first century discover that Shakespeare is still their contemporary.

Introduction

In *Free Shakespeare* (1974), John Russell Brown expressed an idealistic vision of studying Shakespeare that he put in opposition to the educational status quo:

> As a student, I would like to forget "argument," "criticism," and "interpretation" in favour of exploration and encounter; I would like to learn how best to experience the plays as images of human action and to respond creatively to their great wealth of suggestion. I do not wish to pin down the plays, but allow them to take wing in the freedom of my own reactions, so that they enlarge and refine my imagination. This is not to invoke mindlessness, but to set one's attention upon a living, moving target. (Brown 1974, 112)

Thirty years later, Mike Jones presents an acute diagnosis of contemporary Shakespeare education, in which, it seems, not much has changed:

> In the twenty-first century Shakespeare IS difficult to read, difficult to understand, difficult to even get your tongue around. . . . So why do we do it? . . . We study Shakespeare because it represents the very best in story telling principle[s] and narrative form. We study Shakespeare because it is a window to understanding a fascinating and influential period in history. We study Shakespeare to come to an understanding of the universal themes (love, hate, revenge, tragedy, hope, redemption) . . . So, with this in mind, it is worth considering new ways in which Shakespearian ideas can be made accessible to new generations. (Jones 2006, par. 1-2)

Jones acknowledges both Shakespeare's power and educational barriers to a full appreciation of his drama and recommends that we find new ways of bringing Shakespeare to a new generation. In this article, we argue that whereas films or various teachers' guides and workshops undoubtedly provide useful tools for presenting students with the Bard, there exists a method of teaching Shakespeare in the twenty-first century that, in some respects, is even more effective than a direct encounter with the text. This method exposes students to "the phenomenon of recycling Shakespeare" (Pavis 1986, 7) in a way that both alerts them to the drama's mythical quality — that is, to the fact that the Shakespeare myth does not consist of "a universal individual genius creating literary texts that remain a permanently valuable repository of human experience and wisdom; but a collaborative cultural process in which plays were made by writers, theatrical entrepreneurs, architects and craftsmen, actors and audience" (Holderness 1988, 13) — and enables them to find much in Shakespeare's plays to identify with through exercising the artistic freedom of experiment. Such a method seems particularly apposite in times when Shakespeare's figure is "reverentially installed

within the high cultural consciousness, but then pays a price by being forced to live a more vigorous, parodic existence in mass cultural consciousness" (Wheale 1991, 4).

As teachers, we fully agree with Nigel Wheale's plea that "we can make use of this high/low differential in the classroom, where most [students] will know Shakespeare first as a miasma, a reputation, and then, more familiarly as that pack of five cigarettes" (Wheale 1991, 4). We claim that it is possible to establish common ground between Shakespeare as a popular and as an educational phenomenon by employing the role-playing game (RPG) convention which, although it originated as an entertainment, has increasingly revealed its potential as a didactic tool. More specifically, we claim that an RPG-mediated approach to Shakespeare 1) effectively reveals the ongoing influence of Shakespeare through his recycling in contemporary culture; 2) corresponds well with certain characteristics of Shakespeare's plays themselves; and 3) provides young audiences with access to those aspects of the plays that tend to be marginalized in conventional discussions or to remain reserved for advanced academic analysis, including practical ways to deal with the issues of postmodernist critical theories. What has directly prompted this reflection on the potential of an RPG-mediated approach to Shakespeare is an educational project that we have been carrying out in the school year 2005-2006 with a group of students from the Institute of English Studies, Wroc#aw University, Poland. The enterprise has been addressed to a group of fifteen-year-olds attending Hugon Ko##;#taj Junior High School No. 14 in Wroc#aw. Originally, we intended to limit our cooperation with the school to the organization of the game, preceded by a necessary preparatory meeting or two. Yet the extraordinarily positive reception to our offer by students and teachers alike made the project evolve into a broader, three-stage enterprise that was carried out for the better part of the school year. It has been based on a gradual increasing of the students' active engagement with Shakespeare through various forms of playful activities, culminating with their participation in a live-action role-playing game that employs a special setting, props, and costumes. The theoretical, educational, and fictional aspects of the project are this essay's subject.

Shakespeare In Popular Culture

As Marta Wiszniowska playfully comments on Shakespearean drama, "each play becomes 'what you will,' as no universal reading is available" (Wiszniowska 1997, 119). All readings, Wiszniowska further explains, are marked with "past experiences, political backcloth, personal preferences and convictions. . . . The text, an entity of infinite plasticity, can be turned and twisted at will, and the limits of the operation remain unspecified" (119). This process, in turn, has contributed to the transformation of Shakespeare into myth: "Filtered through contemporary

issues or otherwise manipulated, Shakespeare's texts have become a reservoir of new ideas . . . making him function the way ancient myths have been functioning for centuries" (159-60). Thus, in order to analyze "Shakespeare's myth," it is not sufficient merely to engage in subversive counter-interpretations of the plays. Rather, one should focus on concrete examples of Shakespeare's presence outside "Literature," "on the streets and in ad-wars on the airwaves, reproduced on beermats and via the million shadows of a hologram" (Wheale 1991, 4), or in Shakespeare comics (cf. Wiszniowska 1997, 160).[1] All of these cultural practices testify to the infinite vitality of Shakespeare, demonstrating that, in Terry Eagleton's humorous pun, the Bard "Shakespeareanises everything" (Eagleton 1988, 206), including fantasy fiction.

Fantasy In Shakespeare/Shakespeare In Fantasy

Shakespeare's inspiration from mythology, folktales, and other shared fantasies has been well documented.[2] These motifs may be seen as the playwright's link not only with past cultures, but also with future ones. Shakespeare and contemporary fantasists share both general and specific fantasy elements, ranging from ghosts, apparitions, witch rituals, or supernatural omens to specific creatures and personages. Had it not been for Shakespeare's interest in Mab, Herne the Hunter, or the urchin, their names would probably have remained recognizable only to a narrow circle of folklorists, literature experts, and mythology enthusiasts, instead of finding their way into twenty-first century fantasy lexicons, such as *R#kopis Znaleziony w Smoczej Jaskini* [*A Manuscript Found in a Dragon's Cave*], by Andrzej Sapkowski, a popular Polish fantasy writer (Sapkowski 2001, 80, 100, 208). It may be argued, furthermore, that without *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the idea of the elven court — although it is deeply rooted in the Celtic and Nordic myth traditions — would not have entered Western culture as a shared element that could be appropriated by J. R. R. Tolkien and his followers. Oberon and Robin Goodfellow also should thank the playwright for their immortal fame (Neaman 2000, 462).[3]

"Shakespeare"'s influence on the literary genre of fantasy manifests itself more specifically in writers' active appropriation of Shakespearean mythology and in the audience's recognition of Shakespearean elements within the literature. Some fantasy texts contain more or less clichéd allusions to Shakespeare, which tend to be random, episodic, or superficial. They can be easily recognized, but rarely have any significance for the audience's understanding of a given text. In *The Chronicles of Amber* (1978), for instance, Roger Zelazny gives the name of Oberon to the founder of a dynasty whose history is the main theme of the cycle, a borrowing not followed by any more profound plot or character analogies. In "Harry Potter and the Shakespearean Allusion,"

Miranda Johnson-Haddad discusses a number of Shakespeare inspirations in J. K. Rowling's famous novel cycle, ranging from the name of Hermione and that of The Weird Sisters music band (Johnson-Haddad 2003, 163-64) to less obvious similarities between Wormtail and Titus Andronicus (164-66) and between the ghost-haunting scenes in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Richard III* (168). Internet surfers may entertain themselves by joining a session of Chris Slee's game *9mm Juliet* (2006), which is based on the *Feng Shui* role-playing game written by Robin D. Laws and published by Atlas games. The opening website introduces the game with a Shakespeare paraphrase:

> Two zaibatsu [Japanese "money cliques" or conglomerates], both alike in dignity,
>   In Neo-Edo [Tokyo regenerated after the destruction in 2007], where we lay our
> scene,
>   From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
>   Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
> — William Shakespeare (updated AD 2056 [Slee 2006])

The setting is described as "the world of Romeo and Juliet transported into the post-Apocalypse city of technological marvels common to anime and manga" (Slee 2006). In the above examples, Shakespearean appropriations function as universal, commonly recognizable points of reference rather than material for in-depth reflection. The addressee — be it a reader, viewer, or player — has no difficulty detecting the allusions, as they tend to be explicit. Furthermore, a player does not need to know anything about *Romeo and Juliet* to survive in the cyberpunk Tokyo of the future.

Some fantasy novels engage in more complex and insightful explorations of Shakespearean threads. Tad Williams's *Caliban's Hour* (1994), for instance, retells *The Tempest* from Caliban's viewpoint. Poul Anderson's *A Midsummer Tempest* (1974) employs the two plays in its title as the background for an alternative-history plot. In *Wyrd Sisters* (1988), Terry Pratchett aims his sharp satire at *Macbeth*, as well as at a number of other plays, while his *Lords and Ladies* (1992) provides an unusual depiction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s central theme. The reader of the "A Midsummer Night's Dream" episode in the *Sandman* comic series (Gaiman 1990) faces an even more demanding task. In the story created by Neil Gaiman, with illustrations by Charles Vess and Malcolm Jones III, elements of the well-known play are subtly entwined with historical and biographical data concerning Shakespeare's life. The incorporation of Shakespeare's original story into a broader fantasy universe developed by the contemporary writer is to a large extent based on literary details and sophisticated associations.

The relation between Shakespeare and fantasy, now long-established, has important educational potential. A growing number of researchers and critics see fantasy as exceptionally useful for facing anxieties and dilemmas in contemporary culture.[4] When young readers, who generally encounter classic literary works within the context of classroom syllabi, find themselves instead within the dynamic realm of popular culture, the potential results of such a fusion, visualized by a teacher of literature, seem tempting, to say the least. This impression has inspired us to create an educational project based on the surprisingly dynamic and productive relations among Shakespeare, contemporary fantasy, and the entertainment phenomenon of role-playing games.

Role-Playing Games, Shakespeare, and Metafiction

Players of role-playing games identify imaginatively with their fictional characters, participating spontaneously in events that have been pre-planned in a game scenario, but also experiencing all sorts of unplanned adventures. Because this process of identification often means preparing adequate costumes, props, or decorations, one could conclude that role-playing games do not differ much from theater. RPG players, however, are neither passive members of the audience nor actors strictly adhering to a pre-prepared plot; instead, they expand their characters and narrate their own stories. Hence, role-playing games let the players enter a narrative and actively shape its development according to a set of general rules that guarantee both a sense of believability and coherence for the fictional world. As long as they comply with the rules, players can co-create their game as they wish. In role-playing games, furthermore, there are no clearly defined winners or losers. As Jerry Stratton writes, "the player's objective is to help to create a story and to have fun. You may give your character other goals, but the success of your character does not determine any sense of winning or losing. Like life, it's not so much whether you win or lose, but how you play the game" (Stratton 2006, par. 5).

While such an activity might seem chaotic, it is feasible because of several clearly defined, but nevertheless variable and fluid, structural components of the game: the system, the player characters, the game scenario, and the figure of the game master. The system is typically contained in an official handbook delineating the fictional universe, the scenery, and the mechanics of the game. In other words, the system is a compilation of technical and fictional guidelines enabling the players to act (for example, rules determining the success or failure of a player's efforts). Game participants create their characters, that is, their representatives, in the course of the game. The development of the plot, however, is usually coordinated by the game master, a nearly omniscient figure who moderates and arbitrates both communication among players and their relations with the non-player aspects of the game. The game master also develops the scenario — a new script

or published game story — for a given game session and then, as the game unfolds, weaves together the emerging narratives of the various participants. Hence, the game master can be seen as parallel to the implied author of literary theory, who projects and narrates the action. Finally, the game master is responsible for all kinds of reactions to the players' moves within the game, such as the behavior of living creatures inhabiting the fictional world or fluctuations in its inanimate aspects. It is noteworthy that the pre-written scenario functions only as a plastic outline of the plot: although the overarching narrative may revolve around certain clearly determined concepts or ideas, including didactic ones, it is continually reshaped in the course of the game, depending on the behavior and decisions of the player characters. In other words, the game master supplies an open story line to be completed by all the participants, who in turn assume a more or less equal part in the process of constructing and narrating the final story. Thus, in a sense, role-playing games overcome some key limitations of traditional texts by enabling addressees to enter the plot and by providing them with strategies both to transform it and to interact with the "author." As Polish game researcher Jerzy Szeja has shown in *Gry Fabularne — Nowe Zjawisko Kultury Wspó#czesnej* [*RPGs as a New Phenomenon of Modern Culture*] (2004), the extent of players' involvement in the creation of the story and their ability to cooperate with one another and integrate themselves into the fictional world is much greater than in any written composition (Szeja 2004, 13-14).

Although role-playing games constitute a stand-alone phenomenon with their own set of traditions — derived more or less equally from fiction and strategic board games — since their very origin RPG's have also been a part of the fantasy realm: "The discussed entertainment in its present shape is a result of a process which started in the 1960s and was based on enriching strategic board games with narrative elements, often associated with a specific work of fiction and usually belonging to the fantasy or sci-fi convention" (Zarzycka 2005, 57). While the connection between fantasy fiction intended for reading and for playing hardly requires a detailed demonstration, the common ground linking role-playing games directly with Shakespeare is less obvious.

In *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001), Daniel Mackay depicts RPG as an art of performance and compares it to the traditional theater. As John Kim summarizes Mackay's reasoning, "[RPG] is a format unique from other arts, in that it is directed solely at other performers and that each is simultaneously audience and actor. . . . [T]he player [is] acting as an author in performing the character, and also acting as [an] audience by watching other players" (Kim 2006a, par. 24). Polish researchers also address the relation between role-playing games and drama. According to Szeja, what distinguishes participation in a game from acting is that "an actor does not really need to identify with the character in order to pretend effectively that they are someone else." In role-playing, by contrast, "[t]he greatest pleasure for a player is to get captured

by the character's emotions . . . though other participants may watch the process to the extent that it is externalized and enabled by the game session setting" (Szeja 2004, 16-17).[5] Dobros#awa Grzybkowska derives the actor's identification with the character and substitution of stage for the world from "Aristotle's theater" and sees it as a confirmation that "RPG is a field affected by two traditions originating from ancient tragedy and epos. . . . The ancient tragedy is reflected in the perception of the imagined and in the changes that occur within spectators. In RPG the receiver is simultaneously a performer and a sign creator, as well as an interpreter" (Grzybkowska 2005, 315-16).[6]

Building on these general studies, we maintain that despite some important differences between RPG and theater, what is important for our purposes is the way in which both Shakespearean drama and role-playing games blur the borders between authors, audience, and participants through their metafictional aspects. Terry Eagleton's *William Shakespeare* (1986) ascribes to Shakespeare an almost postmodernist awareness of identity's relative character (Eagleton 1986, 22-23 and passim) and of the disintegration of the border between reality and illusion that is caused by an overflow of free signifiers devoid of stable signifieds (13, 26). His reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, focuses on the deconstruction of reality by means of a metafictional employment of dream and fantasy, leading to a strongly postmodernist conclusion:

> To dismiss itself [the play] nervously as a dream is no defence, since dreams are in one sense just as real as anything else. Reality secretes dreams as part of its very nature — just as it is "natural" for that solid public institution the theatre to generate fantasies. It is difficult, then, for the play to defuse the seriousness of its content by branding it as illusion, since it has just spent five acts demonstrating that illusion is a very serious business indeed. (26)

This depiction of the comedy brings it surprisingly close to contemporary theoretical explorations of hyper-reality.[7]

Other critics also attend to the self-conscious aspects of Shakespeare's writings. Analyzing *Hamlet*, Agnieszka Rasmus discusses particular metafictional and metadramatic tools operating in the text, such as: reminding the audience that they are watching an illusion; disclosing the presence of the audience; incorporating formal discussion of theater and the language of theater; projecting theatrical discourses on life and human relationships; and finally, using the device of the play-within-the-play, as well as evoking generally the sense of role-playing-within-a-role whenever a character consciously pretends to be someone else (Rasmus 2002, 189-90). She considers this last quality to be especially significant, as assuming a role "[breaks] dramatic illusion by making us

conscious of various possibilities a good performance has, and also by pointing to the fact that often what one assumes to be real, turns out to be a pretence, an act of seeming" (Rasmus 2002, 190). Thus, she points to an implicit connection between Shakespearean drama and role-playing games.

While the self-conscious characteristics of Shakespeare's writing have been explored thoroughly, similar attributes of role-playing games remain an open field that still invites research. The distinction between the "textual" and the "actual" aspect of meta-consciousness is far more complicated in an activity whose spontaneously developed fictional content is inseparable from the physical process of composing it during a game session than it is in a play whose inscribed plot, especially if available on paper, remains more or less independent from its performed realizations.[8] Despite those complications, a literary approach to metafiction, as defined by Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1993), seems useful when dealing with RPG. An important aspect of a role-playing game is plunging the audience into the story and providing them with an opportunity not only to interact with the plot and fictional world, but also to create them. According to Waugh, the basic tool for such explorations is "the construction of a fictional illusion . . . and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (Waugh 1993, 6). One can notice here a clear parallel to the first-hand experience of a role-playing game participant, who is both immersed in the world of imagination and also remains aware of the play rules and conventions.

Capitalizing on the metafictional qualities shared by RPG and Shakespearean drama, our project relocates Shakespeare to a context meaningful to contemporary young adults, granting them an opportunity for active involvement in the plays. We extend discussion of the games beyond contemporary contexts, however, by emphasizing their functional analogy to the Elizabethan theater as a multidimensional space of politically and culturally conditioned interaction between authors and addressees, or performers and consumers of culture. The functioning of this space involves not only narrative operations on the level of fictional constructs, but also operations that produce actual interactive experiences. This is the source of the game's creative potential.

The Project: The Adventures of Puck's Crew

So, you're finally here. The place could hardly be called impressive, at least in comparison to the metropolitan qualities of major Polish venues. Still, the forest-embraced village possesses a certain charm. Maybe it's the beautiful, if a bit secluded, mountain area, with its woodland valleys, fantastically shaped rocks, and roaring waterfalls? Maybe it's the old

castle in the center of Przeworno, seemingly out-of-place, and strangely belonging to the heart of the village at the same time?[9] Pity that no one has thought of raising a fortress upon some mountain or big rock — the brownish one over there would be just fine. It'd be fun — bitter-sweet, though — to pretend it's the Edinburgh Festival at which you are performing and not a local holiday at some small Polish settlement. Next year, perhaps.

Three years ago, when you were a bunch of enthusiastic visionaries, sick and tired of theatrical conventions, techniques, and the hegemonic one-and-only interpretations which all those acting instructors had fed you with, you thought that starting Puck's Crew was a life-and-soul-saving idea. Break the chains! Free Willy! Unbind Prometheus! Release Ariel! Let slip the Dogs of War! Today you are somewhat faded, a little bit tamed, slightly less carefree, more than slightly broke, and on the brink of disintegration. Still, you are struggling, fighting the growingly hopeless campaign for your dream. And your presence in this very village at this very moment heralds a new battle. When your current Loser-In-Chief, Mac'Betta, announced that Puck's Crew had been invited by the Przeworno Mayor to perform during local festivities, first you stared at her as if she had gone mad. Then you started speaking and shouting all at once.

So here you are, with your hearts nearly half as heavy with uncertainty as your rucksacks are with the usual traveling equipment, costumes, and props. No reason for complaints here. As Mac'Betta has merrily noticed, the Bard himself used to wander around the country, spreading his genius in a similar manner. And you are going to spend this night in a real castle; that's probably more than the Admiral's Men could boast of on returning to London from their countryside tours.

You're moving towards the stone fortress. It is almost evening, and the play is planned for tomorrow noon. What you need is a good night's sleep and a vivid, enthusiastic rehearsal that will maybe, just maybe, enable you to regain some echo of your original spontaneity. Will your rooms be spacious enough to contain the storm scene, with all the dancing and scarf-waving? Or is there some better place to rehearse? Where will the actual stage be located, anyway? Well, that's one of the first things to check tomorrow, but now . . . Wait, what is it? It looks as if some other people were staying at the castle — or under it, judging by what they are doing with those shovels and buckets. Will they mind your little warm-up? Though the question is rather if you will mind their inexplicable nightly attempts at

undermining the castle. Hey, what is that noise all about?! Who are those people to make such a fuss about some excessively dirty thing they have just dug out from among the residues of the late dungeon entrance?! Maybe it is some unexploded missile left here by World War Two . . . Should they be throwing it on the ground like that?! What if it is going to . . .

The unnerving buzz in your ears is gradually dying out, only to become replaced by a variety of not utterly unfamiliar sounds. Horse-hooves, cartwheels, steps of people all around, and human voices. Human speech, to be exact. Only, it's not Polish. German, maybe? In that case you should understand something — you spent some six months squatting in Berlin after the last Love Parade, didn't you? So maybe English? But none of Puck's Crew is totally ignorant of that language, either. Well, it must be Dutch, then. Some sightseeing group, probably. At night? On horseback? Fortunately, the silvery mist that has stubbornly been blocking your view since the moment of the explosion finally seems to be fading away. You take a look around yourselves, only to blink your eyes in bewilderment.

On the day of the performance, the street, framed by two rows of narrow houses and two rather broad streams of waste, is bathed in the bright morning sunlight and crowded with oddly-dressed people. Well, to be honest, if you choose to use the "majority-makes-the-norm" rule, then YOU are the ones in odd clothes — at least, at this moment. Each of you has an appropriate sixteenth-century costume buried somewhere in your rucksacks, but what has possessed all those people to wear such attire when running their daily errands? What's more, some of the passers-by seem to be formulating similar questions about your own appearance. There already are some five or six people standing in the middle of the road and giving you curious looks. A broad-shouldered man, preceded by a characteristic beer smell, is moving towards you, saying something that your trained-actor ears start to associate loosely with an English intonation pattern. The violent gestures he is making, however, are only too familiar. The aggressive bloke is almost face-to-face with Mac'Betta, when Something happens — for the second time. It feels as if some blast has overcome you, only there's been no explosion, not even a team of crazy archaeologists, like the first time. Just this wave, leaving your legs vibrating with the sensation you might experience during an earthquake. After a moment of stunned silence, life returns to the street. Some man falls to his knees, praying. A group of women return to their quarrel over a basketful of mushrooms, though their voices are not as sharp and passionate as before. Several young

boys are running past you, shouting something similar to "That's it! Burn the witch!" The ex-aggressor is being brutally removed from the street by a panting horse and three men trying to calm it.

Simultaneously, Billy — your best comic performer and "international contacts manager" because of his degree in English studies — is having an inspiration and decides to share it with you: "The Globe," he announces weakly, pointing his shaking finger at a big house down the road, "That's the Globe." And then you gain an inexplicable and irrational, but nonetheless firm, conviction that whatever has just happened had its epicenter in that very building.

The above narrative is an exemplary briefing given to one of the four groups of players when they enter the game.[10] Because the scenario is intended for a broad spectrum of users, some of whom will not be skilled players, we decided to provide them with fictional group identities only and thus allow them to adjust the individual characters to their own preferences. The Puck's Crew theater company is one such collective identity. The remaining three are as follows: a literary Shakespearean society that has decided to organize a convention in Przeworno because certain historical facts link this location to Elizabethan England; a delegation of archaeologists and historians invited by the new owner of the castle to the celebration; and finally, a group of environmental activists who, having heard of a new retention reservoir constructed on a nearby river, have decided to check out the structure's ecological impact.[11]

In the opening part of the game, all four groups are, in one way or another, brought to the castle, where the archaeologists discover a strange object. What they cannot know is that the finding is in fact a magical artifact left there a long time ago by one Edward Kelly and John Dee during their European travels.[12] When the spell is activated, people present in its range — wide enough to include all players — are relocated in space and time and even, as some participants will discover, cast beyond this world.

As a result of the magical explosion, Puck's Crew and the team of unfortunate historians are transferred to William Shakespeare's London, though they land in different parts of the city. The actors, as mentioned above, find themselves in the vicinity of the Globe Theatre and witness a series of mysterious phenomena centered around the building. Even a short investigation should lead players to conclude that the strange things happening in the theater have something to do with the awkward intertwining of the Bard's fictional worlds with reality. At the same time, the historical team identifies its surroundings as a London market square and the event attracting the

attention of the local community as a witchcraft trial. The defendant is none other than William Shakespeare. A mysterious woman will secretly contact the players and ask them to help her save the playwright. Whether or not they agree, they will soon see that the trial is only one node in a spider web of intrigues involving Shakespeare's fellow dramatists, wise women from the countryside, and representatives from Queen Elizabeth's court. Shakespeare possesses the magical artifact: when two powerful warlocks serving Her Majesty, Dee and Kelly, discover its existence, they immediately decide to employ its unique power not only for the sake of the Crown, but also for their own purposes.[13]

While the twenty-first century actors and historians become acquainted with Renaissance London, the Shakespeare society members and the environmentalists are exposed to an even more radical experience. Their magical journey has ended in two different parts of a fictional world that has been created from Shakespeare's imagination. The literary enthusiasts will be excited to discover that they have landed near Dunsinane castle. What might disturb their delight, however, will be the growing recognition of a terrible intrigue gone wrong — a dark, overwhelming threat gradually noticed by the players during their subsequent meetings with various Shakespearean protagonists. While the Shakespeareans benefit from their own knowledge in order to solve the frightening mystery, the ecological activists wander through an enchanted countryside. Talking to various background characters or creatures who are trying to live peacefully within the circle of life, this group of players discovers that the natural harmony of this world is about to be shattered. In this way, the game participants become part of a complicated, multidimensional plot whose particular threads will unite in a dramatic climax.

The interdisciplinary and multi-level, not to say cross-cultural, approach to the dramatist that we hope to obtain through the RPG project responds well to current trends in contemporary theater. Discussing contemporary Shakespeare adaptations, Wiszniowska claims that an initially "complex but purely theatrical endeavor subsequently turn[s] into a kaleidoscope of experimentation, which having transgressed the confines of classical theater . . . negotiate[s] with other media and their strategies" (Wiszniowska 1997, 162-63). In terms of the didactic (or, in a broader sense) acculturating, aspects of "Shakespeare recycling," it is worth emphasizing that, as Wiszniowska notices, in many cases the adaptation of plays to the sensitivity and needs of the present audience means a rejection of some Elizabethan characteristics, such as the richness of staging (112). As she further argues, we can distinguish two extreme versions of the Bard's modern existence: one depicts the original text as a nearly sacred artifact, while the other exposes the text to various, often radical reinterpretations and manipulations (114). We intend to lead our young addressees to

a middle ground between those two extremes and to provide them with a tangible experience of Shakespeare's colorful epoch, while simultaneously granting them an opportunity to work out in their own terms the contents of his plays.

A Preliminary Happening: "Learning By Playing"

The idea of linking Shakespearean education with gaming and other experimental techniques enjoys its own, albeit limited, history. In "Learning by Playing," Greg Maillet describes "The Play's the Thing," which is issued by the Aristoplay company, as "a structured, competitive game which helps its players develop not only a greater factual knowledge of Shakespearean drama, but also to participate in, perchance to perform, the spirit of play at its heart" (Maillet 2003, 270). According to Maillet, "The Play's the Thing" combines the use of imagination — the participants identify themselves with authentic or fictional Elizabethan actors — with the process of learning about the historical and cultural reality of Shakespearean theater and about the contents of the plays (271). Maillet is also right to emphasize the material advantage of the product — a traditional board game with additional card sets and dice — (271-73) over technologically advanced video games that also are inspired by Shakespeare's plays and allow players to become Elizabethan protagonists. He notes that the latter form of adaptation is closer to "rewriting Shakespeare's plays" than to studying them as texts and hence, amusing as such games may be, they do not inspire "the sublime aesthetic experience of Shakespeare's plays" (271). His argument can be extended to role-playing games, which have evolved from board games into two contemporary forms: one based on computers, the other exploring the realm of unmediated storytelling. Our project, obviously belonging to the latter category, may thus be seen as a "natural" continuation of the phenomenon initiated by Aristoplay's board game and referred to by Maillet as "Learning by Playing" (269). Jennifer Lee Carrell's article, "Playing with Shakespeare: Making Worlds from Words," describes another version of "learning by playing" in a university course that she prepared, which is driven by the premise that "Shakespeare's words are not an end in themselves" (Carrell 2003, 173). The course is composed of three stages, gradually becoming more complicated, challenging, and creative: students begin by learning about Shakespeare's life, his plays, and their contemporary adaptations and then analyze his dramas from some non-obvious perspective, such as the politics, philosophy, or ethics of the epoch, until finally they are ready to compose original dramatic episodes and to perform them in class (Carrell 2003, 75).

Our project follows a similar pattern, moving from acquisition to creation, although adjusted for a different audience. The opening part of the experiment, carried out in December 2005 and February 2006, had, to a large extent, an informative character. The teenagers learned about the

idea of role-playing, as not all of them had played this kind of game before. The students also attended an academic lecture on Elizabethan life and the status of theater in that epoch. This phase of the project provided the participants with a general background and mastery of the subject so that they might navigate the planned game freely and activate their own creativity.

In the second stage of the project, the students had to face challenges based on close readings and various ways of interpreting excerpts from Shakespeare's plays. They did so during special workshops supervised and coordinated by four teachers who had, with our help and advice, defined particular activities and developed the logistics of the tasks. Teachers and students demonstrated the impressive results of their common efforts during a school "happening" on March 2, 2006.

To prepare the "happening," students were encouraged to combine an active reading of Shakespeare's texts with the use of imagination and various forms of creativity — from several types of performance to art, computer applications, and analytical thinking — matching the skills and interests of individual participants. We had every reason to expect that, after this extensive and challenging exercise, whose successful accomplishment brought pleasure and satisfaction to the teenagers and teachers as well as to our academic team, the students were well prepared for the game itself. The students' final meeting with Shakespeare, in May 2006, showcased their own activity and imagination. Below is a sample of the students' work in preparation for the happening; the file is available in both .ppt and .pdf formats.

Work Sample: Powerpoint Presentation (.pdf) Work Sample: Powerpoint Presentation (.ppt)

Glimpses of the Happening

Below you can see the Happening unfold as students use different methods and media to capture the spirit of Shakespeare's plays and their worlds.

(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) (A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)

The Game: Creating a Microworld

Although for now we can only speculate about the final outcome of our endeavor, we base our expectations on a firm theoretical and pedagogical background. According to Tina Blaine and Brenda Bakker Harger,

improvisation is the key to successful interdisciplinary projects as it contains all the elements of social interaction and community engagement that encourage meaningful work. Improvisational techniques can be used to stimulate collaboration and lead to more productive teamwork. The creative process is dependant upon the formation of open-minded environments that allow participants to expand their vocabularies and forge new realms of experience. (Blaine and Harger 2006, par. 1-2)

As the authors point out, the crucial elements for such a pedagogical project are improvisation and spontaneous acts of creation, combined with predetermined rules for communication (par. 4). The application of role-playing games to educational purposes supports our discussion of their didactic potential with empirical observation. According to Thomas Duus Henriksen, for instance, the links between RPG and education go back to the 1970s. Henriksen identifies the main source of their uniqueness as a teaching and learning tool in the game's being "a system of common interpretation, in which the participants use an invalidated discourse to build and interact within a shared fictional world. We use role-play to alter our perception of the world, in order to facilitate an experience, which would otherwise be out of reach" (Henriksen 2006, 112). Such operations may prove very useful in the educational process as they position the participants in certain situations, thereby facilitating their "implicit understanding of situations, training social skills, and . . . bridging the gap between theory and practice" (114).

Lloyd P. Rieber's analysis of the "constructivist idea of a microworld [that] is a small, but complete, version of some domain of interest" (Rieber 2006, par. 13) presents one method for intertwining didactic elements with the play convention. The concept's crucial characteristic is that it "match[es] the learner's cognitive and affective state . . . little or no training is necessary to begin using it . . . since successful microworlds rely and build on an individual's own natural tendencies toward learning" (par. 14). The major aspects of our Shakespearean RPG project clearly conform to the above definition. That participants' experience depends on immersion in a complete fictional world, subordinated in this case to Shakespeare's epoch and writings, is obvious. The only preparation required of the students taking part in the game is a familiarization with the concept of role-playing and with a limited set of technical and organizational rules. Rieber's analysis of the process of learning through a microworld fully reveals the educational potential of that technique within our game. Rieber defines the process experienced by microworld users as self-regulated learning, which is characterized by three basic factors: intrinsic motivation, metacognition, and active behavior (par. 16). Intrinsic motivation means that the participants perceive the activity as personally rewarding and, as a consequence, are encouraged to continue (par. 16). Some games

achieve this effect through the so-called "endogenous fantasy," in which it is impossible to sense the transition from the game as such to its didactic message. What is crucial is that "if the learner is interested in the fantasy, he or she will consequently be interested in the content" (par. 34). Because any role-playing game is based on an immersion in fantasy of some kind, the very choice of activity as the project formula guarantees that the game will meet the requirement for an "endogenous fantasy." Hence, intrinsic motivation depends not so much on a skilful act of disguising the educational content as on the overall attractiveness of the fictional world and plot. Another feature of self-regulated learning, metacognition, refers to the participants' "planning and goal-setting" process, through which they can supervise their own learning. Finally, active behavior denotes choosing and shaping the participants' environment according to their own learning preferences (par. 16). All these criteria are met almost automatically by the RPG convention, which requires players to undertake actions that usually receive immediate feedback from the fictional world or other participants.

A theoretical look at players' interactions with the game world may explain more fully their role in the learning process. Using Jean Piaget's theory as a background for the acquisition of knowledge through a microworld, and with reference to George Forman and Peter B. Pufall's *Constructivism in the Computer Age* (1998), Rieber considers three attributes of the learning process: epistemic conflict, self-reflection, and self-regulation. Epistemic conflict involves an ongoing mental "balancing act" by each individual. As Rieber points out, although we long for an orderly reality, we continually face a fluid world that we need to understand and evaluate. This, in turn, necessitates self-reflection. Still, Rieber stresses, "only through self-regulation will an individual arrive at a resolution or solution to the conflict. Either the conflict is resolved as fitting an established mental structure (i.e., assimilation), or a new structure is formed (i.e., accommodation); a third possibility is that the conflict remains unresolved and no learning takes place" (Rieber 2006, par. 18).[14] In this sense, knowledge acquisition occurs either through reference to familiar elements or through stimulation to produce something utterly new (par. 19). Although it would be hard to analyze the students' contact with Shakespearean subjects in terms of absorbing some measurable amount of information, the double, or even triple experience of, in Henriksen's words, "altering perception," definitely stimulates the processes of assimilation and accommodation. As the game begins, players undergo an initial "suspension of disbelief" that is connected with an awareness of the difference between real life and make-believe. Initially, sustaining the illusion may require some effort, as the fictional reality reveals itself as an almost perfect mirror reflection of the actual one. Yet an abrupt turn of events transfers the participants' game alter egos to sixteenth-century

England. At that moment, the players need to use their imagination not only to visualize their new surroundings, but also to work out a way of functioning in that remote era, a task accomplished mostly by reference to historical and cultural knowledge that the participants already possess and by looking for analogies to their everyday experience. Therefore, we may assume that the assimilation process plays a major role as the mechanism enabling students to cope with the new situation facing them.

This, however, is not the end of their immersive journey. In addition to the historically different, but otherwise rather predictable reality of Elizabethan London, the players' characters are faced with the existence of a magical Otherworld whose structures cannot be referred directly to anything known from ordinary experience. Although the fact that the wonderland is strongly affected by the universes of Shakespeare's plays provides players with a number of orientation points, only through accommodation — that is, the production of completely new concepts — do participants deal effectively with this fictional space. Undoubtedly, the performance of these complicated intellectual and imaginary operations is challenging. It may, therefore, be a little overenthusiastic to assume that in practice they are going to work perfectly. The sheer complexity of the game's immersion process, however, reflects the potentially powerful impact that success can have on students.

In this context, we cannot separate the didactic from the fictional content of our project. On a general level, we distinguish three major goals for the project: 1) acquainting students with the aesthetics of Shakespeare's plays, with their cultural context, and with the Elizabethan epoch; 2) raising students' environmental consciousness through ecocritical interpretations of literature; and 3) promoting social skills and ethical values, such as cooperation, responsibility, the ability to negotiate, and team work. The players' active participation in inventing the shared story releases their individual creativity in several ways. They benefit from resolving problems posed by the plot, from performing, and from identifying emotionally with their role-played characters. Active participation stimulates self-expression and enables a more profound insight into issues touched on by the game. The simulation also offers players an immediate experience of situations and problems produced by the fictional reality, while the existence of pre-defined rules enables game supervisors to imbue these problems with educational content and to retain partial control over the players' actions. Participation in the game stimulates the players' imagination through their visualization of character, setting, and action. Finally, the game generates a multidimensional environment that confronts the players with tangible problems and dilemmas.

The fictional game world that we offer is based on selected historical characteristics of Shakespeare's epoch, as well as on episodes from and settings for his writings that have been

enriched by fantasy inspirations familiar to the students from popular culture. Because of their remarkably picturesque landscapes, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, and *Macbeth* have exerted the strongest influence on the shape of the Otherworld. We should clarify that an RPG game world is an entity far more complex than a set of decorations defining a physical stage. It is, rather, a multidimensional construct, similar to literary fantasy worlds such as J .R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. Such a world has its own geography, ecology, economy, politics, and languages. It is inhabited by various creatures and peoples who generate stand-alone cultures and societies. All these attributes provide a broad spectrum of possibilities for addressing the subtleties of Shakespearean plots. Perhaps the substantial benefit of such a variety is reducing the impression of strangeness that often accompanies students' contact with the Bard's temporally and culturally remote creations. Moreover, the game world draws players' attention to the cultural context of the playwright's work, the reception of his plays by contemporaries, and finally, the impact of Shakespeare on European culture today. In terms of literary study, the game plot also implements ecocritical approaches to fiction. Building on several discussions of Shakespeare that emphasize the ecocritical potential of his works, we decided to produce a game scenario that would combine issues of cultural and literary studies with contemporary social and ecological problems. Finally, it should be underlined that the characters role-played by the participants are not original Shakespearean protagonists, although the latter may appear as non-player characters acted out by the game supervisors. Nor is the game based on an adaptation and recreation of plots invented by the Bard. Valuable as such an experiment could prove, it would have to be approached in a separate project.

Lessons Learned

Our project's general intentions have been twofold: to span the cultural distance that separates young adults from literary classics; and to recontextualize in contemporary terms special qualities of Shakespeare's plays. The easily achievable harmony, not to say "natural" responsiveness, between the formulae of contemporary entertainment and Renaissance theater help to surmount two particularly annoying obstacles often noted by teachers when introducing young people to Shakespeare: temporal and cultural distance and the gap between popular culture and "high-art" (Carrell 2003, 172-73). This responsiveness may also provide the project participants with a nearly tangible conviction that in the twenty-first century, the Bard is alive and trendsetting.

Let us close this essay by reviewing the project's major assumptions in terms of their practical realization:

1. The project introduces students to the experience of Shakespearean theater in a pleasurable and authentic way. To a large extent, it is the game plot that produces both pleasure and a sense of Shakespeare as a theatrical phenomenon, focused as it is around an almost literal influence of Shakespeare and his art on the external world, both in his own epoch — when a magical catastrophe looms over Elizabethan England — and in the players' own reality, from which they are brutally kidnapped as a result of complex political and supernatural intrigue from the past. During the realization of the game, we hope that the fictional confirmation of the playwright's unfading importance is accompanied in the participants' memory by the sense of having fun thanks to his heritage.

In fact, the students derived a specific kind of pleasure from a mixture of hard work, heartfelt involvement, and spontaneous play during the preparation for and performance of the mid-term happening. The overall atmosphere of that event may be well described with Carrell's words: "That's the joy of rehearsal rooms at their best: ideally, they're big, safe, communal playpens, where no idea is greeted as stupid or too silly, and where quite a few are strong enough to make their way on stage" (Carrell 2003, 179). Even more noteworthy is the fact that in developing their own approaches to Shakespearean tasks, the students themselves have constructed bridges between the plays and cultural conventions of the twenty-first century.[15] Student recyclings of Shakespeare included connecting the craftsmen of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a stereotypical depiction of contemporary Polish workers; employing visually attractive computer techniques and close reading of references to animals in the text in order to recreate the plays' settings; providing jazz and rock accompaniments to the songs of Ariel and the three witches; dancing a Renaissance dance while wearing modern clothing; and producing portraits of Ariel, Titania, and Caliban in the style of fantasy art.

2. The project can be used to familiarize students with a sense of Shakespeare's theater and with selected concepts from literary theory and criticism. The ability of RPGs to stimulate metacognition among the players brings to mind another aspect of the project, namely, its practical use for familiarizing a young audience with selected concepts from contemporary literary study, with the game convention serving as a tool to bypass the obvious difficulties that would accompany an attempt at feeding high school children advanced theory.[16] In RPG, the audience, like the reader of a metafictional novel, participates actively. Particular literary theories handle the idea that reading is an act of co-creation in different ways; RPG provides a fruitful ground for such explorations.

Another important concept that can be substantiated by participation in the game is the performativity of language. According to Waugh, in a metafictional novel, "[o]ur statements about literary-fictional characters can be verified only by consulting the statements which are those characters, which have brought them into existence." In other words, "to make a statement in fiction is to make a character" (Waugh 1993, 92). In a similar manner, a role-playing session constitutes a unique environment where, on the one hand, everything is purely textual, conventional, and word-constructed, but, on the other, becomes strangely tangible and "real," as a collective make-believe unfolds and suddenly the player is surrounded not by friends and teachers, but instead by fictional creatures and characters that may have familiar faces, but act in unfamiliar ways. Like the metafictional novel, RPGs remind us that "authors" work through linguistic, artistic, and cultural conventions. They are themselves "invented" by readers who are "authors" working through linguistic, artistic, and cultural conventions, and so on (134). Producing such an effect through role-playing, rather than through absorbing a sophisticated work of postmodern fiction, seems better suited to teenagers. Moreover, the game puts the player in confrontation with the "author" Shakespeare, who is considered among the fundamental creators of Western culture. Shakespeare's appearance as a fictional character immerses the players in a cognitive and ontological chaos that is created by the now fluid relations among the functions of author, audience, directors, and roles that are imposed by the shared process of building the game plot. This non-compulsory, but controlled exposure to deconstructive thinking can help students become explorers of culture.

3. The project introduces students to important cultural and political issues through interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary problems. Placing the game in a world on the verge of ecological disaster has been inspired partly by ecocriticism, a theoretical investigation of how literature — whose "business is to work upon consciousness," as Jonathan Bate puts it (Bate 1991, 23) — represents, and may potentially question and transform, our predominantly pragmatic and instrumental conception of the natural environment. The increasing number and variety of ecocritical studies testifies to critics' growing understanding of the far-reaching implications of ecology, with its stress on interdependence, diversity, and the vulnerability of natural life, for both the present and the future of global society.

Structural elements of the game plot, inspired by the ecological emphasis on interconnectivity, provide a ground to acknowledge that, as Lewis Thomas contends, "[w]e do not have solitary beings. Every creature is, in some sense, connected to and dependent on the rest" (Thomas 1974, 7). Hence, the game's stress on cooperation, an attitude preferred to that of competition and domination, encourages players to perceive nature, and themselves in it, as "holistic and symbiotic" (Skuba#a and Oziewicz 2006, 151). One of the crucial threads in our game plot is

devoted precisely to the implementation of Thomas's appeal. The disturbance of natural harmony in our game, as well as the multifaceted implications of such a disturbance, have been directly inspired by Joseph W. Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethic* (1972) and Don D. Elgin's *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novel* (1985), which can be seen as an application of Meeker's theory to the genre of fantasy fiction. Meeker's readings of works ranging from *Hamlet* and *Lysistrata* to *Catch-22* and *The Divine Comedy* reveal two basic types of human behavior: "maladaptive models," which alienate us both from nature and other people, and "adaptive" ones (Elgin 1985, 15), which position humanity as "but one part of a system to which it must accommodate itself and whose survival must be a primary concern if it hopes to continue to exist" (16). According to Meeker, maladaptive postures are expressed in literary works dominated by the tragic mode, which has pervaded Western culture for centuries. As Elgin explains, "the philosophy of the tragic" (16) is based on the following assumptions: (1) humankind is undeniably superior to nature and in fact constitutes the hub of the universe; (2) human morality is beyond natural limits, and nature must be subordinated to it; and (3) the individual "affirms his or her importance in the universe" (14). On the other hand, the adaptive model has been harbored within comedy: "[T]he philosophy of the comic" foregrounds human ability to survive to participate in "the continuity of life itself, despite all moralities" (16). Comedy is focused only on life itself, "not the eternal spiritual life, but the physical life of the individual human animal" (16). In this sense, the comic tradition increases our awareness of belonging to the natural environment and of the resulting necessity to obey the laws of the universe in order to survive "with as much freedom and happiness as possible in a distinctly imperfect world" (182).[17]

Although the corpus of Shakespeare's plays that we have used as an inspiration for the game world and for several plot elements covers tragedies and comedies alike, the entertaining formula of the activity, whose very name underlines the importance of playing and game, has, unsurprisingly, assigned the dominant function to the comic mode. While this effect may potentially lead to discrediting certain elements of the Shakespearean universe in a non-productive way, this danger is, in our opinion, outweighed by the positive aspects of comedy as seen from an ecological perspective. Their prevalence in the game may be used to show the students that although we may not even be aware of this possibility, there nevertheless exist tactics for solving disputes apart from lethal violence and aggressive confrontation. It is true that one might find it difficult to succeed when one is "trapped . . . in a cultural tradition which [still] affirms the supremacy of the tragic point of view" (Meeker 1980, 76). But is it not worth trying, even in the narrow context of the students' everyday social interactions?

Conclusion

The above considerations have provided a frame for a one-time realization of a project concerned with the application of an RPG medium to a literary didactic activity. We have chosen an ecocritical perspective as suitable for the age group of students with whom we have been working, the school program, the scope of teenagers' own interests, and the actual setting of this particular game. Nevertheless, environmental concerns are only one of many contemporary problems that can be incorporated into the structure of an educational role-playing game project. As we hope to have demonstrated in the above discussion of the RPG's theoretical potential, this formula of collective activity may deal effectively with a range of other issues, including, although not limited to, gender or race. That collective initiatives of this kind may perform an important social role finds confirmation in the words of Petra Kuppers, who thus describes her involvement in a project based on storytelling in public spaces, carried out by a community of people experiencing psychiatric treatment: "Through performance . . . we inscribed our right of access to these spaces, making our presences felt. The performance act became the performative act: a conscious inscription of difference into sedimented patterns of naturalized 'law.' With this, our work is not located within art therapy . . ., but within political labor, changing both ourselves and our world" (Kuppers 2006, par. 6). Although the activity described by Kuppers differs from our role-playing game, we believe that her experience is worth considering in the context of possible future employments of the RPG convention.

While the potential uses of RPG for voicing social issues through literature and art await further exploration, we may hope that even if participating in our project does not change students' overall perception of Shakespearean creativity, at least they will not fall into the trap of thinking that one can formulate one definitive meaning of any given Shakespeare play. Actually, the mobilization of the teenagers' imaginative and performative potential, enforced by the interactive character of the game, is likely to exert a broader and, with a bit of luck, beneficial influence on their attitude toward participating in culture. The act of — to borrow Kuppers's vocabulary — inscribing their right of access and making their presences felt in the spaces reserved in the context of a traditional classroom activity for the established creators of the literary experience — namely the original author and educated interpreters such as critics and teachers — may reinforce the young adults' self-assurance in future contact with various forms of art, including those still labelled as "high." Furthermore, the memory of a genuine creative effort and involvement connected with "taming" the challenging source material during the "happening" preparations, as well as active participation in the game itself, will probably prevent them from acquiring the overconfident attitude of consumers

inclined to judge the achievements of others, but unwilling to make any creative effort of their own. We believe that learning to reach a balance between self-expression and appreciation of creativity can be a useful lesson, providing the students with an optimal approach to a contemporary, highly interactive, and non-discriminating cultural environment.

Notes

1. We would like to thank our students, Anna Wielu#ska, Piotr Anusiewicz, Mariusz Bieniek, Mateusz Bilski, #ukasz Buchalski, and #ukasz Korzen, as well as the teachers and students of Hugon Ko###taj Junior High School No. 14 in Wroc#aw, for their tremendous enthusiasm for and intense creative involvement in the project. For a brief discussion of Shakespeare comics, see "Shakespeare comics are hard act to follow" at http://www.shropshirestar.com/ show_article.php?aID=10468.

2. See for instance Dale M. Blount's "Modifications in Occult Folklore as a Comic Device in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (1984); Katherine M. Briggs's *The Anatomy of Puck* (1959); and Stuart M. Tave's *Lovers, Clowns, and Fairies: An Essay on Comedies* (1993).

3. See the forthcoming *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft (2007).

4. See Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976); Diana Waggoner's *The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy* (1978); Ann Swinfen's *In Defence of Fantasy* (1984); Martha C. Sammons's *"A Better Country": The Worlds of Religious Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1988); Millicent Lenz's *Nuclear Age Literature for Youth: The Quest for a Life-Affirming Ethic* (1990); Kath Filmer-Davies's *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth-Century Fantasy Literature* (1992); Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992); and *Towards or Back to Human Values? Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Contemporary Fantasy*, edited by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marek Oziewicz (2006).

5. Translation from Polish by Agata Zarzycka.

6. Translation from Polish by Agata Zarzycka.

7. For an overview of various aspects of dispersing the border between reality and fiction in the postmodern culture see, for instance, *Introducing Postmodernism*, by Richard Appignanesi and Chris Carrat, with Ziauddin Sardar and Patrick Curry (1996).

8. Many RPG researchers strongly emphasize this connection as unique and crucial for the nature of role-playing games. Lisa Padol, for instance, argues that "[t]here is nothing to prevent the video taping of a game session; however, the tape is not the text. The text is the session itself. It is, therefore, transitory, existing only for the duration of the session. . . . It can be

transcribed, summarized, or videotaped and shown to those who did not participate in the session. However, once this has happened, we no longer have the text itself. We have a new text, and a new audience . . . . nevertheless, the game session itself is the primary text, a story whose tellers and audience are the same" (Padol 2006, par. 17, 35). Grzybkowska draws a theoretical conclusion based on the ephemeral quality of role-playing games and sees the phenomenon as a part of contemporary folklore, noticing that "[a] role-playing game is a situation of continuous dialogue between the literature which is created and the one which creates — living literature." (Grzybkowska 2005, 309-10; translation from Polish by Agata Zarzycka).

9. The name of a village in the south-west of Poland that will provide the actual scenery for our game. The castle, the local celebrations and an array of other minor facts serve as a bridge between the real-life situation — children arriving in Przeworno on a school excursion — and the fictional game reality in which the characters visit the same place, though for different reasons.

10. During the actual game the narration is, of course, performed orally by one of the Game Masters and may be adapted to the particular situation and participants' needs; for instance, the part describing the magical explosion and the view of sixteenth-century London can be extended so that each player has a chance to realize fully what has happened. Furthermore, the presented sample is, for obvious reasons, devoid of possible contributions by players in that part of the plot, in their interactions with the game world, as well as with one another. It is, for instance, very probable that the castle-ground episode just before the time and space travel occurs will turn into a piece of intense action if the players decide to intervene before the mysterious diggers activate the artifact that is at the center of another game thread. On the other hand, the theater group may not witness the activation moment at all, if they decide to spend more time outside the castle. In that case they are kidnapped by magic without gaining the smallest clue as to what might have occurred and why. The above excerpt is therefore to be treated only as an outline of an imaginary game realization.

11. This is another real-life inspiration employed in the game scenario.

12. Although we have discovered that the two Elizabethan alchemists did in fact reach Poland, their visit to Przeworno is, of course, our *licentia poetica*.

13. We discuss here the particular threads of the plot to give an overall idea of its direction. One should remember that the amount of knowledge available to players in various stages of the game, as well as the level of plot complexity, is changeable and depends on the individual performance of participants.

14. See *Constructivism in the Computer Age*, edited by George Forman and George and Peter B. Pufall (1988).

15. The teachers acted only as advisors and coordinators of the happening, while the core of the interpretation and processing of the tasks remained a sovereign invention of particular student teams.

16. For discussion of the role-playing games' impact on relations among author, text, and the audience, see John Kim's "Story and Narrative Paradigms in Role-Playing Games" (2006a) and "Immersive Story" (2006b), as well as the texts by Lisa Padol (2006), Dobros#awa Grzybkowska (2005), and Jerzy Szeja (2004) that are mentioned in this essay.

17. More specifically, a comic character behaves from motives that are completely different from those that drive the behavior of a tragic character. As Elgin convincingly argues, the comic character "knows that food and drink and sex are good, not because someone says so or because a philosophical position justifies them, but because the character has experienced them" (Elgin 1985, 21). Thus, "as the tragic hero suffers or dies for ideals, the comic hero survives without them" (Meeker 1980, 39). In this way, as Elgin further explains, a comic character rejects religious, philosophical, or ideological abstractions, thereby promoting "a view of humanity that emphasizes the limited nature of its powers and the likelihood of the system's long-range existence instead of its own" (Elgin 1985, 21). This is unquestionably a more sustainable concept of humankind than the illusion of human grandeur and exceptionalism promoted by tragedy. It is hard not to agree with Meeker that in the age of global conflicts, "the tragic philosophy" has become an obsolete, and even harmful, illusion that blinds humanity to its only significant concern, that of the continuation of life on Earth. As Meeker says, "literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic mode seeks to return to normal" (Meeker 1980, 40). As Meeker's study of *Hamlet* shows, the play combines the tragic and the comic modes in that its protagonist "straddles the uncomfortable space between" (65). More precisely, as Meeker sees it, Hamlet is close to us in that he is as puzzled as we often are with the question "whether the world that he lives in is a moral universe governed by dependable metaphysical values or a biological environment which he shares on more or less equal terms with the other animals" (65).

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