

FREE ORLICZ FROM CUSTODY

Cursed Soldiers Retelling History Through Escape Rooms

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INTRODUCTION

Entertaining, immersive, and innocent for some, suspiciously modern and dangerous for others, Escape and Puzzle Rooms are a worldwide phenomenon that, in Europe, has found the biggest markets in Hungary (Nicholson, 2015) and Poland.¹ Despite their increasing popularity, ERs have been predominantly considered a business practice, a form of entertainment, and an educational tool. The majority of publications focus on financial aspects, construction, puzzles creation, or team-building potential (e.g., Byrd, 2016; Clare, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Hamer-Morton, 2018; Jackson & Drake, 2019; Kalugin, 2019); some scholars have traced the roots of Escape Rooms (e.g., Nicholson 2015; Klemp 2017). Their educational potential, especially for museums and libraries, is also beginning to be recognized (e.g., Borrego,

1. From 2013, the Polish escape room market was the quickest growing in Europe in number of rooms and visitors, reaching its peak around February 2018 with 1030 rooms by 400 companies and two million players per year countrywide (which was the second-highest in Europe). With such a rapid growth of this new entertainment form, safety and law officers did not manage to keep up with controls and regulations. It resulted in quite a hectic and mixed market containing some high quality and safe rooms, as well as haphazardly organized and damaged venues. In January 2019, in one of the escape rooms in North Poland, the tragic accident resulted in the death of five teenagers, which started a massive controversy around the sole idea of Escape Rooms and the laws regulating safety in this form of entertainment. The government took firm steps to supervise and regulate these activities all over the country, applying new laws and procedures, but the trust of authorities and public were lost. Even escape rooms that passed all the controls were frequently closed due to mistrust of landlords and communities. As a result, we experienced a rapid decrease in Poland's number of escape rooms - in February 2020, the largest escape rooms listing webpage lockme.pl lists 546 commercial escape rooms, which means that around half of all ERs in Poland were closed in the last year and that the Polish market now ranks the fourth or fifth largest in Europe. In November 2020, the number slightly decreased to 517, but this change can be attributed to the pandemic.

Fernández, Blanes & Robles, 2017; Johnson 2017; Monaghan & Nicholson, 2017; Walsh, 2017; Kroski, 2018; Nicholson 2018). However, the body of secondary literature remains somewhat limited.

In this essay, I would like to dissect how escape rooms can serve as a rhetorical tool and a mirror for political discourses. First, I will discuss the relationship between educational escape rooms and teaching history in ideological terms. Then the focus will move to the ways in which Polish history-teaching escape rooms have become parts of the dominant discourse of the ruling *Law and Justice* party (further: PiS). Next, I will argue that this discourse is, in fact, a coherent retelling of history through different media that creates a strong narrative and offers a simple identity scheme. In places where the narrative offered by the official discourse is inflexible, nationalistic, and based on mythologized “national heroes,” government-funded educational escape rooms might strongly demonstrate a variety of rhetorical influences. Simultaneously, rooms organized by those ideologically aligned with those who do not share the political views of the government might display the same rhetorical practices while conveying a different message.²

The theoretical foundation of this article will then be presented, utilizing the possibilities of adapting the rhetorical theory to research escape rooms. Finally, a close reading of one such escape room will be offered, exemplifying practices and influences provided and shaped by this entertainment form that are firmly linked to the discourse described above.

TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH ESCAPE ROOMS

The hybridity of escape rooms has many intriguing facets. One of them, especially relevant in educational escape rooms, is the

2. This may be seen for example when comparing the leftist queer themed artistic escape room “Escape Living Room,” by Katarzyna Rowska and Sonia Milch (Warsaw, 2016, Pracownia Duży Pokój) to Pope-themed “At Lolek’s,” by public primary school in Łochów.

issue of intermingling reality and fiction. Some escape rooms are closer to fictional media; others, including those discussed here, are more historical than fictional with close affinities to documentary films or museum experiences.

Most media forms attempt to evoke reality through different stimuli – ‘ letters or pictures metaphorically denote other sensual experiences. Escape rooms still use those ways – film or text are parts of the experience – but they switch the weight of the message to a more “real,” multi-sensorial experience. In a way, they can be more real and more fictional at the same time. More real because one experiences space, smell, sound, and touch, especially with actual artifacts or reproductions. Less, because when the message is close to reality but still stylized (as mannequins instead of people), so the difference is even more visible.

Educational escape rooms are a specific genre that differs from popular business-focused and entertainment-focused escape rooms. When carefully planned and well-executed, educational escape rooms can be great teaching tools, providing immersive learning spaces, memory stimulating emotions, such as thrill or delight, and multi-sensorial experiences that can foster not only groupwork abilities but also various cognitive and practical skills. With an appropriate introduction and debriefing,³ the possibilities seem endless.

Poland boasts a wide range of history-themed escape rooms: from medieval knights and World War II to post-1945 Polish People’s Republic. They are mostly executed with a comical or thrilling vibe in mind, without the objective of teaching authentic history, promising a *realistic* atmosphere instead. Nevertheless, there have been several escape rooms created for educational purposes, especially in the field of post-1945

3. For a best practices guide on these two, see Nicholson, 2012.

history.⁴ Educational escape rooms in Poland are frequently established by government institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance⁵ (further: IPN), educational institutions, and foundations for different events,⁶ and often financed with public money through state grants. Admission tends to be free or inexpensive. As a puzzle-solving-based way of teaching history, these projects have unique educational and persuasive outcomes.

However, a closer look at these escape rooms demonstrates that they also serve as a discursive tool that recreates and retells Poland's history, promoting a mythologized, nationalistic, and pro-Catholic version of it rather than offering multidimensional approaches and diverse narratives. The reason for this decisive conservative slant may lie in the limited possibilities of retelling history through a escape room. It is certainly a challenge to create an intensely immersive experience for 60 minutes while respecting all the diverse opinions and prospects of history. The creators of "Free Orlicz" have suggested that the room's goals are, above all, to inspire the players to do further research and pursue learning. Nevertheless, such a game experience conveys a particular vision of history that can be very strong and long-lasting in terms of impression, although not necessarily facts and information.

As a mirror of the current political discourse, the message created by the conservative Escape Rooms is more of an amnesiac practice substituting memory with a politically-useful myth than a memorialization of the past and a creation of

4. Most of them are not in operation now due to pandemic, though some plan to reopen. While waiting for the situation to resolve, some offer e-experiences such as Live-Cam escape rooms or escape room in the form of Genial.ly presentation. That was the choice, for example, of history and theology-themed escape room "At Lolek's," which recounts the life and teachings of Karol Wojtyła, a.k.a. Pope John Paul II, and is a project of a public primary school in Łochów, see: <https://view.genial.ly/5ee0f8450cb7020cf4023121/interactive-content-sladami-lolka-wadowice>.

5. The full English name of the institution is The Institute of National Remembrance: Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (short: IPN). More information in English: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en>

6. For example, the room named *Regain Freedom: the Blue Army* was organized to honor the 100th anniversary of regaining freedom by the city of Toruń. The creators – "Archipelag Inicjatyw" Foundation, were financially supported by the city, voivodeship, and The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage program *Free Poland*.

diverse, in-depth knowledge of history with its attendant moral uncertainties. Advertised as the “truth,” especially from the authority of institutions such as IPN, public schools, and City Councils, this retelling is hardly flexible.

In many of these escape rooms, their alleged truthfulness is stated explicitly in promotional materials. For example, on the Facebook Page of “At Lolek’s” we can read:

Attention! Our Escape Room is an educational experience for children; therefore, all puzzles are accompanied by commentaries about the life and teachings of John Paul II. The main aim of the room is to learn the most important facts about John Paul II while having fun.

It is relatively easy to associate educational escape rooms with politics and rhetoric, which is why I have chosen them for my analysis. The research tools and techniques for escape rooms analysis are still in development, thus researching explicit examples seems appropriate. I believe that every escape room exercises a degree of rhetorical influence on the players, which can be recovered. This assumption is informed by Fredric Jameson’s assertion (2007) that all texts are political and historical and mirror the unconscious of social life, although they do not necessarily say what the author “intended” to say. Escape room research should also include a reworking of procedural rhetoric introduced by Ian Bogost (2010).

Since the 1960s, linguistic turn in humanities, constructionism (e.g., Mieland, 1965), narrativism (e.g., Rayment-Pickart, 2000), and other critical approaches to history and philosophy, we are certainly aware that historiographers are always biased – by their knowledge, culture, traditions from their discipline, role in society, political views as well as the sources and their own features (for more on the existence of *real past* and *historical past* see: Goldstein, 1976). As diverse interpretations, retellings, and

rewritings of history exist simultaneously, they can all serve as an educational core curriculum. However, the idea and tradition of public education in Europe from its 19th-century roots have been predominantly concerned with nurturing patriotic citizenship, primarily through history, geography, and literature studies (Bohan, 2005). Many of the approaches and methods established in 19th-century Germany are still used in Polish schools today. The nationalistic influence on the history curriculum is not limited to Poland⁷. The most extreme opinions state that the nation's sole concept is preserved by public education (especially through history) and popular narration, creating general consent (Bohan, 2005).

In Poland, compulsory education applies to all people under 18; it is mostly public and centrally governed. Within the recent reform of education (2017-19), the specific vision of history, excluding the diversity of voices in favor of traditionally understood history, and being in line with the current ruling party discourse of choice, are strongly reflected in core curriculum constraining all educational institutions (even private).⁸ Undoubtedly there is a degree of heterogeneity, as teachers, schools, or authorities may treat government's instructions somewhat differently; the school is not the only possible source of historical knowledge either, although, along with the immediate family, it remains the most influential. Nevertheless, the implemented reform and general discourse set the tone for public education, influencing and forming the understanding and notion of history for the majority of the students. What shapes attitudes, behaviors, demeanors the most

7. (for details and discussion on the issue in American curriculum see Bohan, 2005.)

8. The official curriculum of history for primary schools states that the core values to be taught and created in pupils are "the love for the homeland" and "pride from national achievements." These two serve as the guidelines for the changes, which above all mean a more significant focus on the national history and teaching about so-called "national heroes" - the group of 25 people of the greatest importance in creating Polish culture chosen by curriculum creators (21 males and four females). In the commentary to the core curriculum, Włodzimierz Suleja explains that "the essence of the change in teaching history is stressing the behavioural, patriotic and emotional aspects that will create in pupils strong national consciousness and historical identity." Interestingly, one of the few groups explicitly identified in the core curriculum as essential is the armed forces of "Cursed Soldiers" (Suleja, 2020).

is not the detailed knowledge of specific historical facts and nuances but the somewhat unconscious atmosphere and dogmas conveyed by a dominant narrative. There is also a long-lasting tradition of romanticized patriotism cultivated in state education that makes the return to mythologized, heroes-based narrative even easier.

The current government has maintained a fixed position on history, which is being rewritten and retold around some core construct of the nation as unified, pure, morally sound, deserving pride, suffering pressure from enemies, Catholic and honorable. The narrative of this sort – simplified, exclusionary, and unnuanced, fosters nationalism and discourages more challenging and multi-perspective worldviews that have started to emerge in the past decade. The present state's official discourse on history can be generally outlined as possessing three main features.

Firstly, several easily noticeable central tropes are used as slogans and keywords in political speeches, texts, and documents. They are always dividing people and ideas into two simple, moral categories that are to evoke strong and apparent emotions connected to the hearing of the slogan (see: Kłosińska & Rusinek, 2019):

- **The good, Polish (Us) ones:** God, Honor, Homeland; Victims; Cursed (also: Unbroken) Soldiers; (Real) Family; Martyrologue; Great Poland; Military Force; Catholic Morality; Pureness; Longevity; Civilization; Steadfastness; Sovereign; Pro-life; Poland is Getting up from Kneeling Down, and more.
- **The bad ones anti-Polish, (Others):** Brussels; Red Plague; Rainbow Plague; Gender; Demon of Progress; Animalistic Element; Cast; Communists and Thieves; Leftist; LGBT; Post-communist; Industry of Contempt; Pro-choice Murderers;

Cyclists and Vegetarians; UBs; Multicultural; Poland in Ruins, and similar.

Secondly, the nationalistic discourse is vigorously implemented through different social and political actions such as changing the names of public institutions to contain such words as “Polish” and “National,” changes in the educational core curriculum, new institutions concerning Polish National dignity, media propaganda, money distribution to people and institutions recreating and retelling the history in the principal tropes mentioned in point 1.

Thirdly, romanticized patriotism, a constant, sublime narration that served as a supporting force through the times of occupation and World Wars, is also simplistic and perpetuates stereotypes.

These three vectors serve as a historical, political, and social context and apply mainly to educational escape rooms, as they were created by public institutions and aimed to educate patriotic citizens.

THE RHETORIC OF ESCAPE ROOMS

Since the beginning, rhetoric understood as an art, practice, and public speaking knowledge, has been a core part of western political and pedagogical practices. The classical Aristotelean approach that proposed conceptualization of three ways of expression (*logos, ethos, pathos*) and five parts of the speech (invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery) was interestingly applied to digital studies (see: Eyman, 2015). With further adaptation, it can be especially useful while reflecting on escape rooms.

Aristotle and Eyman reworked

The canonical Aristotelian pentad served as a frame for Eyman

(2015) to create possible traditional thought applications to digital rhetoric. Continuing his approach, I would like to propose adding escape rooms to the table comparing said applications. The first three columns come from Eyman’s book on digital rhetoric; my proposition is the last one.

Canon	Classical Definition/use	Digital rhetoric	Escape Room Rhetoric
Invention	Finding available means of persuasion	Searching and negotiating networks of information; using multimodal and multimedia tools.	Finding theme, ambient and creating the story. Puzzle design. Deciding on main emotions to be evoked during the pay.
Arrangement	Formalised organisation	Manipulating digital media as well as selecting ready - made works and reconstituting them into new works, remixing.	Arranging puzzles in correlation to narrative as well as expected players path; creating and collecting mechanisms, objects and furniture. Building (renovating) and arranging the whole space.
Style	Ornamentation / appropriate form	Understanding elements of design (color, motion, interactivity, font choice, appropriate use of multimedia, etc.).	Understanding elements of design of various media as well as constructing new mechanisms; Understanding the tools to create the atmosphere connected to the theme of the room.
Delivery	Oral presentation	Understanding systems of distribution (including the technical frameworks that support varying protocols and networks).	Players gaining. Introductory speech - rules and narrative. Assistance through the play (videosupervision, audio-contact, clues). Debriefing. NPC actor play.
Memory	Memorisation of speech	Information literacy - knowing how to store, retrieve, and manipulate information (personal or project based; blogs or databases).	Play-testing the room, memorising and scripting the look of the rom to be re-created after every group. Game literacy - consciousness of typical Escape Room formula and meanings, conservation of the room.

Thus, deriving lenses from classical theories, I would suggest searching for:

- The intent.
- Argument: what and how the room argues.
- Structure of the discursive act: what the parts of the whole experience are.
- Shaping effect of the medium.
- Relationships between the creator and the persona: in escape room narratives, the role of storyteller and the person who is responsible for the room creation in the narrative are

frequently separate, while the role of narrator is combined – e.g., in “Wizards Chamber,” the persona would be the eponymous wizard, a storyteller is a worker of the venue, and both of them narrate the room along with some NPCs.

- Creating “presence”: the aspects of escape room create objects or persons in the mind of players that do not exist in physical space.
- What the room and its narrative lacks or reworks: Aspects omitted or chosen to be reinterpreted, in both historical and franchise-based escape rooms.
- Contradictions regarding narrative, space, idea, objects, theme.
- Audience: how players and society influenced the creators; how each walkthrough and players change the physical space; the place in society of the escape room; how the audience reacted.

In classical rhetoric, the figures of speech would be serving as central analytical tools. Some of them can be “translated” to escape rooms:

- **Metaphor** – e.g., in the PRL-themed escape room *Absurds of PRL* (Mysterious Room, Lodz), the flower packet hidden in the sofa served as a metaphor for the widespread poverty of the society.
- **Symbols** can be used inside the room as clues for puzzles, but also to evoke a narrative world, e.g., a stick with a magnet used as a “magical wand,” where through in-room mechanisms, the magnetic power of the stick can change the lighting.
- **Humor** practices showed in verbal, visual, and narrative features of the room and physical space, e.g., furniture on the ceiling.

- **Personification**, e.g. mannequins used as NPC's with their voices played as a recording.
- **Hyperbole** – the whole room can serve as a hyperbole for a specific theme or historical time.
- **Metonymy**, e.g. a police flashing beacon's mounted on a wardrobe that activates to pretend that the players are going in a police car from a hotel to a police station (Majdańska 18 ER, *Pokój Hotelowy*, Warsaw).

Textual, structural, inter-textual

In her paper analyzing *Resident Evil 4* (2009), Diane Carr proposed approaching games through three lenses: textual (meaning: signification and actualization by playing), structural (considering design and form) and inter-textual (seeing the reading formation of the audience as a part of the meaning) analysis – the two first inspired by Roland Barthes, the latter by Bennett and Woollacott. The textual approach suggests viewing games as *playable texts*. This approach is especially relevant for escape room analysis when one tries to decode the rhetorical message. Playability is vital, since the meaning and persuasive effects emerge only during the act of being played (read, watched) (Ibid.), which also concerns escape rooms with an interesting quirk—they are almost always played only once by the participants. It is challenging to carry out research when one cannot attend an event personally, and even then, these events are still not simple to grasp). Similarly to digital games, escape rooms also “are designed; they have rules, and they are actualized through various modes of play. Play is experiential and ephemeral yet embodied, and culturally situated“ (Ibid.). Expanding the structural notion of system drawn by Carr from Barthes (Ibid.), we can state that Escape Rooms are systems that are driven by an grand variety of constituting units, such as rules of the escape room game, physicality, and spatiality of rooms, rules of different puzzles. As for intertextuality, Carr suggests

that the idea of switching attention to the audience (players) is crucial: “Viewers and readers will respond to and interpret a text according in part to their reading formations – the social, cultural and historical make up of their interpretive perspective” (Ibid.). The audience serves as a part of the meaning. The focus shifts to the cultural and ideological forces that stand behind the process of both coding and decoding the meaning (Ibid.). Thus for the Polish Educational escape rooms, I would argue that the central component of meaning is the current political discourse on history with its key concepts. It is connected both with the views of the room’s creators and their intentions to educate in a patriotic way, along with the general respect for institutions’ authority (such as public schools and the IPN), that legitimize the truthfulness of the contents in the room.

To conclude this section, I would like to list the specific features of escape rooms as a rhetorical medium:

- Escape rooms tell and persuade through different media appealing all senses simultaneously. Therefore, they require multimedia literacy, concerning not only written text, film, or audio, but also games and puzzles, and some techniques specific to escape rooms, which seems to be an idiosyncratic feature of modern media-filled culture.
- Though in real-time, escape rooms can change temporality and make filmlike cuts that are understandable for players, serving as a part of culture that does not stand the present in fiction that is real (Jameson, 2007). Players are submerged in fictive and real-time simultaneously – playing and therefore living in both and continuously understanding and mediating them, which as a distinctive part of modern culture, is allowed by the development of the new media.
- The information gathered by exploration is consciously used to *solve* puzzles. There is a *right* answer to a question that lets the players proceed. It is significant, especially in educational

escape rooms, puzzles' answers are understood as historical facts. On the meta-level, it suggests that there are undoubted historical facts and that no other interpretations are possible.

- Escape rooms are simultaneously superficial and real micro worlds – they can be a simulacrum – created to communicate different things (narrative, ideas, puzzle answers, etc.)
- The one-time character of escape room experience is different from most of the re-watchable, re-readable, and re-playable media of modern times, requiring a specific kind of memory and literacy to be consciously consumed.
- An escape room experience is never an individual one, as in the core of it lays the players' group or at least contact with the Game Master. Though each player experiences the room differently and individually, at the same time, the interactions, relations, and emotions between players change the whole message and effect of the experience significantly.
- There is a specific pattern to each escape room's puzzle construction, which creates a rhythm for narrative and the whole experience accordingly. Solving puzzles of a pre-planned escape room path (on possible puzzle structures see: Nicholson, 2015) provides the knots in which the players' experience would be similar (the puzzles should lead to exact outcomes). However, between the knots, the play differs for each group.

CLOSE READING

Unlike other cultural texts of, escape rooms are typically experienced only once, which significantly changes the nature of making meaning. In this particular case, the analysis also encompasses IPN's documentation, films, news articles, and my own interview with one of the creators.

The IPN created the "Free Orlicz from Custody: Cursed Soldiers" escape room in cooperation with the private company

named Room Escape Warszawa. The venue was freely available to the public in 2017–2018 and located in the IPN’s educational venue Przystanek Historia (History Station) in Warsaw. It garnered excellent reviews and was visited by some 3,000 players. The game was around 1 hour long for 2 to 5 people (minimum age 12). During the game, players visited three different areas: the UB⁹ jail, a villager’s hut, and a forest.

Intent and argument – between the truth and the myth

The room’s creators stated in many interviews that they mostly wanted to inspire the players to pursue further research. The second declared aim was to create an entertaining, immersive experience that would encourage players to ponder Polish history in its tragic aspects, especially the heroism and honor of the armed underground groups opposing the soviet dictatorship. The work done by IPN’s educators before and after the experience—around 30 minutes of films, talks, explanations, and test, also suggests that memorizing facts such as dates, names, and area of operation of Cursed Soldiers groups were among the purposes of Escape Room creation, even though the creators stated that it is not the primary objective to acquire the “encyclopedic knowledge.” The use of original artifacts and realistic replicas confirms that the authority of the “real” objects¹⁰ and the museum itself were utilized to create the notion of truthfulness. The background sounds, a mixtape of period radio broadcasts, further enforced the feeling of truthfulness. The evoked atmosphere, along with the institution’s authority, creates an impression of authenticity, enhancing the belief that the room’s message is the truth. This effect was also reinforced by employing facts, such as the date of Stalin’s death, or the names of real historical figures, for the puzzle answers. When

9. Department of Security.

10. Artifacts used in the room were: The door from the Puttusk prison crashed on 25th November 1946 by Stanisław Łanecki “Przelotny,” 2 Lamps from UB station in Garwolin, the map from the ‘40s with marked ascribed as “Region and range of reaction underground bands,” bowls and milk can from militia / SB arrest.

each lock opens with those pieces of information, they signal that the information was “right,” and this teaches the players that all (or most) of the room’s information must be factual. This method was used at least four times in the room. However, not only were facts and historical figures employed to create the message, but many symbols were also utilized. The pseudonym “Orlicz”¹¹ has been chosen to represent the “model Cursed Soldier” because it was the most popular at the time. Similarly, the time of action in the escape the room – the second half of the 40’s, 1946 – symbolizes the actions of the Cursed Army. Time in the room was fictional and factual simultaneously, as the players symbolically “teleported” to the forest and the village that could not be located behind the secret doors of the UB station in real life. The created mini-world served as a simulacrum of the “typical Cursed Army mission”—such mission never happened, but was experienced by players and conflated from different historical as well as ahistorical parts. There were also some non-historical NPC’s that served as allegories, e.g., the peasant Maciej, a personified mannequin with recorded speeches, was an allegory for the relationship between hiding Soldiers and the villagers.

The NPC’s statements suggested a few things. First, the Catholic religion is the faith of the morally right, honorable Polish people. It is also the religion of all the groups represented in the experience (villagers, partisans, Cursed Soldiers) which, along with the pure love for the country, serves as means to recognize the allies. This way, the complicated nature of the countryside at the time is hidden. The instances of conflicts between the country population and the partisans, which involved stealing, violence, and even killing on both sides, are not even hinted at. All non-Catholics are seen as secretive, not honorable, hostile, and morally wrong and therefore deserve death. It is emphasized by the extent of use of Catholicism-related language and

11. Alluding to the *orzeł* (an eagle), which is a Polish National Emblem.

through the tasks that the players had to complete to proceed (regaining the cross and the picture of Holy Mary) to gain the villager's trust. For example, see some of Maciej's statements¹²:

A guest in the house is God in the house! But those communists do not care about God one bit. They took my cross away! They do not have God in their hearts, even banned priests' processions in the fields! (...)

God bless you! The Holy Mother again in my house! Now I am sure that you are the good ones, not some snitches...

Secondly, the extended use of the "communists" and the "reds" as meaning "evil ones," though it is understandable for the period, without any further contextualization during the debriefing, it forges an easy connection between all leftists "red ones" and terrible people, which is frequently used by the current government. (Kłosińska & Rusinek, 2019)

- Thirdly, the glorification of heroism, which is understood as all actions against the communists even if it included severe violence and killing, which are disguised through word choice in such statements as:

I wish that WIARUS was here... the one who **cleaned up the** starost of Łomża Żeglicki who served Russians! Oh well...

The words "cleaned up" (original: "zrobił porządek z") alludes to the action that took place on 7th August 1947. The representation of partisans executed by the wall are two people: starost of Łomża Tomasz Żeglicki, chief of Powiatowa Rada Narodowa¹³ Stanisław Toński and then took their driver Stanisław Baćławski to serve them for a while, to proceed to

12. All NPC's citations were translated by me and come from the materials sent to me by IPN upon request, which I am very thankful for.

13. District National Council.

execute him as well. (Sierzputowski, 2012). There are some accounts of “Wiarus” himself stealing from villagers and shops and being angry at the villagers, to the point of violence, for not “fighting the communists enough” (Ibid.). The metaphor of cleaning is here used in an eschatological sense, which when stated explicitly seems morally ambiguous: the Cursed Soldiers are restoring the world’s order and purity by executing specific people.

Narrative and rhetoric of embodiments

The mission was directly communicated to players by the off-room voice at the beginning:

Good, that you’re already here. UB had smashed our field unit. You are the last who avoided imprisonment. It will be hard to rebuild the net, but the most important thing is to free Orlicz from custody. The only thing that we can help you with is to organize diversion. (mg, 2017)

UB took “Orlicz” to try to smash the socialists governing the area. He is a unit commander who, when freed, will free other soldiers and then lead the partisans to “clean up the place.” This story put a substantial heroic responsibility on the players – as they were responsible not only for the life of imprisoned “Orlicz” but also for the future of the whole armed underground. The players are freeing the unlawfully imprisoned, helping the villagers regain taken devotional (Catholic) artifacts, and letting the partisans avenge their losses by bringing them ammunition and a leader – protecting and helping the victims of Soviet abuse. As the players identified with and took the role of the Cursed Soldiers unit they created as a group, they possibly extrapolated their feelings experienced during the play on their Cursed Soldiers’ vision, which can bear a misleading effect. The players were told that there is a high realism in the narrative, as it was inspired by the real short time of freeing actions, such as

liberating over 70 soldiers of AK¹⁴ from the prison in Łowicz in 40 minutes (Freeing of “Cyfra”) without shooting. They also knew that they had been immersed in a location created using some real objects. Therefore, their emotions might have been understood as in line with historical soldiers’ emotions and feelings. Mostly declared feelings were thrill, excitement, pride, the righteousness of their actions, satisfaction, and sometimes frustration. This simplification that occurs on a game-mechanic level of the room organization might have led to assume that deeper negative feelings such as fright, moral uncertainty, stress, or trauma were not felt by Cursed Soldiers, since they were not encountered by the players or even hinted at in the room. When one experiences the environment and embodied emotions – as opposed to to, e.g. reading a historical text – it is harder to differentiate impressions from facts. This heroic narrative was reinforced by the fact that it was virtually impossible to lose, as the the Game Masters provided clues or secretly extended the time for the players to win. In the finale, Orlicz receives a flashlight from the players so he can signal the armed partisans to free him from the cell. Worth mentioning is that making the room’s goal to deliver a flashlight frees the players from the guilt of bearing a gun – it’s just a flashlight – even if they provided the partisans with ammunition. It could symbolize human-caused death, combat, or fear, but as an experience, it was organized to relieve the players from more profound moral question of the right to take a life. The fun, pride, and entertainment were highlighted even if, historically, the situation involved killing people on both sides and other traumatic events.

CONCLUSION

Although extremely well-executed from an educational and rhetorical perspective , the experience seems to have been based, paradoxically, on nostalgia for the past. This type of nostalgia is

14. The Home Army.

characteristic of post-socialist countries and makes it hard to ethically balance remembering and forgetting the retelling and rewriting of the post-World War II period (Marciniak, 2009). Even though the creators consciously did not address “tough topics,” such as revenge and racism-based actions, or conflict with villagers as well as trauma and exhaustion of Cursed Soldiers, they stated that those are more thoroughly described in IPN’s publications, and were suggested as the further reading in the event brochure. Nevertheless, by not mentioning or addressing these ambiguities, the room itself served as a tool that provides the players with a simplified, pro-Catholic, nationalistic, and purely positive vision of the Cursed Soldiers as the great heroes to emulate, which mirrors the whole public discourse of the PiS.

This retelling understands globalization and hybridity as an enemy.¹⁵ Fredric Jameson (2007) notes that it is almost impossible to build political power on denial of grand narratives (nothingness) and “end of history.” Therefore, some narrations must emerge. Those narrations were appropriated by late capitalism, which employed practices based on nostalgia to create a money-generating myth. The described retelling seems to work similarly, though it does not serve as capitalist, but it is still power-driven action and stereotypisation (Ibid.). The escape room’s educational experience reminds us of the “pseudoexperience, which must be marked as a fantasy and as a failure to achieve representation (by means of representation), [and] is also a second-degree, reactive effort, an attempt to recuperate what lies beyond the reach of my own senses and life experience (...).” (Ibid.) The message of the IPN’s ER is similar to fetishizing boundaries, which Nederveen (2009) called a hybridity backlash and shown as an answer to modern political opening to difference. However, he interestingly suggests the possibility of a different approach that could be used, in my

15. See *Territorial Culture* in Nederveen, 2009.

opinion, in Educational escape rooms as well: “Due to nationalism as the dominant paradigm since the nineteenth century, cultural achievements have been routinely claimed for nations and culture has been *nationalized*, territorialized. A different historical record can be constructed based on the contributions to culture formation and diffusion by diasporas, migrations, strangers” (Ibid.).

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