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Forest Knights: A German Approach to Educational Larp in Youth Work

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Abstract

In a globalised world, the exchange between actors with common interests becomes normalised and easier. The live-action role-play (larp) community is no exception to this and looks at an increasing number of international networks and collaborations. But the social, cultural and structural circumstances in which regional larp associations operate differ between nations. In international conversations often revolve around the question of cultural differences in larp-styles and inspirations for own projects, organisational inquiries on how to start and keep larp events running.

This paper aims to show best practice examples of educational larp (edularp) in child and youth work, carried out by the exemplarily selected German non-formal, educational organisation Waldritter e.V., and how this organisation formed, operates and has been financing its projects securely since the mid-2000s.

Keywords: association, child and youth work, edularp, Germany

要約

グローバル化された世界においては、関心を共有する行為者同士のやりとりが常態化し、より容易なものとなる。ライブ・アクション・ロールプレイング (LARP) コミュニティも例外ではなく、LARP コミュニティにおいても国際的なネットワークや協力関係を増加が見られる。しかし、これら地域的な LARP の連合体が活動を行う社会的・文化的・構造的な状況は、国によって大きく異なる。そのため、国際的な会談では、往々にして、LARP のスタイルや、各プロジェクトの根底にあるインスピレーションにおける文化的な違いの問題を中心に議論が展開されることがある。

本報告では、ドイツのノンフォーマルな教育組織の中でも選り抜きの組織といえる「森の騎士(Waldritter e. V.)」が実施した子ども・若者の教育におけるラープ (エデュラープ(edularp))の好事例を紹介するとともに、この組織がいかに形成され、2000 年代半ば以降、いかにプロジェクトを安全に運営し、その資金を調達してきたかを明らかにする。

キーワード: エデュラープ, 子ども若者支援, ドイツ, LARP, 連合 (Association)

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen the emergence of collaboration between Japanese and German actors of local live-action role-play (larp) research and communities.¹ Brief conversations on larp and RPG, as a common point of interest, developed into regular networking, collaborations and international visits. While it is understood that larp by itself has manifold regional and cultural facets, this is also the case for underlying approaches within the game and the structural organisation behind it.

“Larps are not only designed; they emerge from specific larp cultures and communities. When we look at this thing called ‘larp,’ its surface of uniformity belies the seething conflicts and ideologies that create the games that we

play and the events that we run” (Torner 2017).

The socio-cultural and structural environment contributes, among other factors, the form and shape of the regional larps, but also dictates the ways in which a larp project is possible. Looking at larp in a global context – from Japan to Germany, and from Germany to Japan - can be a valuable opportunity to learn from each other, collaborate, take note of concepts and approaches, and find inspiration in and solutions to local circumstances. This paper intends to glance at best practice examples from the Germany-based non-formal, educational organisation Waldritter e.V., who is a significant key player of educational larp (edularp) for children and young adults. These examples rely on the structural framework of support and funding for registered non-profit associations and independent agencies for child and youth welfare in Germany. As such, the examples cannot be transferred to the Japanese larp communities as they are. Waldritter e.V. is not the

¹ For example, the collaborative panel and larp run of German and Japanese actors at *TPRG Fes 2018* (Kamm 2018).



only organisation in Germany, nor internationally, that offers larp for minors, but it is noteworthy for its contributions to public child and youth welfare, as well as its connections and established standing within the German larp community (LotW 2017b).

2. Waldritter e.V.

Founded in 2007 by Dirk Springenberg and other key actors,² Waldritter e.V. (lit. forest knights) took its name from its main activity at the time: Parents had observed a group of former university classmates larping in the local forest and asked them to offer such a game for their children. This developed into an initial pedagogical concept, based on weekly fantasy larp activities with a group of children, in which the focus was on having fun, learning about nature and the environment, and doing so in a collaborative, social manner. The local authorities officially allowed a part of the forest to be used for regular gaming activities on the condition that the area would be kept clean and undamaged, which enabled the organisers to plan for sustainable recurring fantasy and fairytale settings. Educational tasks were also incorporated into the narrative. The children learned about nature by solving riddles about the environment, for example, searching for specific leaves and trees, finding solutions to treasure box puzzles, or answering the forest witch's questions. The knights of the forest were ready to become the Waldritter e.V. of today.³ Today, in 2019, the organisation is headquartered in the town of Herten and has grown significantly while staying non-profit. Herten lies in the west of Germany, within the Rhine-Ruhr metropolitan region. While Herten is a smaller town with a population of around 60.000, the urban metropolitan region has a comparable size to the population of Tokyo's special wards, although far less densely populated (Stadt Herten 2014).

Waldritter e.V.⁴ is a recognised agency for independent child and youth welfare, politically unaffiliated and nonsectarian, that operates throughout Germany. The organisation is also active internationally and organises cross-national projects. Since January 2017, an office has been established in cooperation with *Simama Community Organisation* (SICO) in Inringa, Tanzania (Waldritter e.V. 2018). In the same year, Waldritter e.V., eight partner organisations, and seven associate partners from different countries initiated the EU

funded *Larpers of the World* (LotW) network, which aims to establish larp as a method for the empowerment of young people in the European civil society (LotW 2017a). Intending to develop methods for historical-political knowledge transfer through larp, Waldritter e.V. is also one of five partner organisations within the transnational project *Sparks of History*, funded by the *Europe for Citizens* program (Europe for Citizens 2018).

The status of recognised agency is granted based on §75 SGB VIII of the German social security code and can be gained by a registered non-profit association (e.V.) when it acts in the field of youth services, is professionally qualified to do so, and guarantees to act in accordance with the German constitution (Chancen NRW 2017). Gaining this status is of paramount importance for associations like Waldritter e.V., because it opens the door to important communal and federal funding. Raising money is a frequent task as each call for proposals typically funds a specific project, although federal grants can be gained to employ staff and finance locations, material, or long-running projects with multiple activities. Altogether, and through the rigorous work of applying for funding constantly, Waldritter e.V. is financially supported by grant benefits from the federal government, the federal states, and the *European Union* (EU), through charity funding, and modest participant fees (Waldritter e.V. 2015b).

According to its policy, Waldritter e.V. focuses on extracurricular, non-formal, and voluntary child and youth education for children and young adults until the age of twenty-seven. This means that the young participants join all activities outside of the formalities and pressure of the school system, of their own volition. The core objective of all project work is defined as emancipation, self-determination, and democratic agency; to lead the young people to conflict solving abilities, democratic competence, solidarity, resilience, empathy, and tolerance. Within the meaning of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Waldritter e.V. aims to support its target group in the development of their personality, individual abilities, as well as their mental and physical capabilities (Waldritter e.V. 2015b).

Education, as defined by Waldritter e.V., is a subject-related and process-oriented development of personality, which qualifies and motivates young people to engage in political participation and self-education. The activities approach all facets of the personality holistically, which is achieved by taking young people seriously, reaching out to them in their own lifeworld, and working towards emotional experiences. In the understanding of Germany as a migration society, a core principle is diversity-sensitive acting for different biographies and

² Known initial members are Silvia Fölsing, Dennis Lange, Sabine Scheler, Dirk Springenberg, Daniel and Frank Steinbach, and their parents.

³ Anecdote told by Waldritter members during private conversations.

⁴ e.V. is an abbreviation of *eingetragener Verein* (registered association), which is a legal status for a registered voluntary association. This allows the association to operate as a juridical person and to apply for the status of non-profit organization.

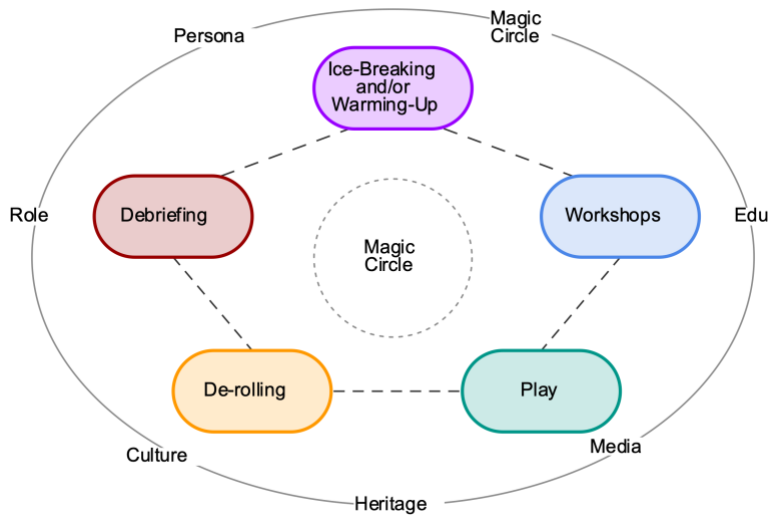


Fig. 1: Edu Larp Phase Structure (Maragliano 2019).

lifeworlds, to ensure participation and inclusion for everyone. Every young person is respected in their individual life experience and history, attitude, norms, wishes, hopes, needs, social situation, sexual orientation, as well as ethnic, religious, national, or gender affiliation. To reach these ambitious goals in the current event society, Waldritter e.V. advertises and develops innovative methods with a focus on reaching educationally alienated participants as well. These methods are often larps or larp-informed, and as such of a narrative and playful nature, adapted for educational usage, and highly participative and interactive (Waldritter e.V. 2015b).

3. Larp with Children and Young Adults

Adventure-based education, the pedagogy of play, and environmental education are an established part of modern child and youth work in Germany. The ideas rooted in actors of early progressive education, such as Rousseau or Pestalozzi, promoting notions of expeditionary and experiential learning in natural environments, have a long tradition in the formal and non-formal German educational system. Play is seen as an integral part of childhood and encouraged by families, teachers, and educators from early childhood on (Retter 1992). As such, it is no surprise that it took only a decade after larp gained public momentum in Germany during the mid-1990ies (Schwohl 2003), for educational larp to come into existence and continue to grow in popularity as an educative method. This method, with its roots in *Nordic larp* structure, uses didactical phases during the course of the event.⁵ These phases are especially important with vulnerable participants and in highly emotional or controversial settings. Therefore, all larp projects

⁵ See the article by Björn-Ole Kamm in this issue concerning *Nordic Larp*.

of Waldritter e.V., follow a didactical phase structure to properly prepare, guide and supervise the participants.

These structures need to be followed by an age-appropriate plot design. Larp for children is not the same as taking children to a larp developed for adults, as the gameplay, supervision, adult interactions, and levels of difficulty aren't usually meant or suitable for young participants. A larp for children needs a child-oriented larp concept based on the targeted age group (Springenberg and Steinbach 2009). It is important to develop the concept based on the planned age group, due to children experiencing game situations and

roleplaying differently as they grow up.

This is evident by looking at developmental psychology stages in which, for example, young children until the age of six cannot differ between fiction and reality, and identify entirely with the narrative and characters. Any in-game scene affects them directly, which requires a high level of supervision and quick resolution of problematic situations.

No less challenging are young adults during the later stages of adolescence, a period of advanced value forming, role conflicts, and social orientation. Another concern regarding larps for underaged participants is the legal framework. Educators working with and supervising minors have legal responsibility. In German law, the extent of this responsibility is not strictly defined, to allow leeway for a wide variety of educational activities with different age groups (Springenberg and Steinbach 2009). Additionally, data security and privacy have become a huge concern among educators as federal and European laws have become more complex and in parts impractical and overly bureaucratic for informal group activities.

4. Best Practice Examples

The activities offered by Waldritter e.V. have grown beyond classic larp, but are still for the most part RPG-related. Core methods are alternate reality games (ARGs), educational larps, drama games, and interactive adventures. Groups and school classes can sign up for single-day activities, such as adventure and urban games, or take part in multi-day events like a space conference, school break programs, or game design workshops.⁶ A strong focus lies on political education, particularly with regards to prevention of right-wing extremism,

⁶ For example, Waldritter e.V. initiated the German Larpwriter network, which offers regular workshops and writing retreats (Larpwriter 2019).

refugees and migration, terrorism and surveillance, German-german history,⁷ and international youth exchange. The pedagogical approaches as well have evolved beyond the wish to build knowledge about nature, the environment, and personal development through adventures. Topics such as career orientation for young people at the end of regular school, substance abuse prevention, STEM and media literacy, inclusion, and history have been incorporated into game activities as well (Waldrutter e.V. 2015c). Recent additions are escape rooms and educational escape room games. As such, selecting just a few best practice examples has been difficult and the following examples only show a small glimpse of the possibilities.

4.1 The Classic: Interactive Waldrutter Adventure Games

At the core of Waldrutter e.V. lies its namesake: the educational fantasy larp with young knights in the forest. These weekly activities are held regularly by local groups at thirteen locations nationwide (Waldrutter e.V. 2015d). The teams are led by personnel professionally trained in pedagogy, and consist of educators, theatre practitioners, environmental experts, and history enthusiasts. Some groups cooperate with schools or youth centres for standalone events and weekly activities. The campaigns are played in a fantastical fairytale forest, in which the children arrive dressed as knights to solve quizzes, take part in a scavenger hunt,⁸ and roleplay within a child-oriented, educational larp concept. The adventure games can be compared to environmental pedagogy concepts used in outdoor-oriented schools and kindergartens with the additional aspect of larping, which allows children to test different roles for themselves, reflect on group dynamics, and learn about nature in a gamified, playful way. This is especially beneficial for children and youth from urban areas, who seldom experience the wider outdoors. Aside from the classic fairytale setting, other historically informed settings are offered (Waldrutter e.V. 2015a).

4.2 For Schools: Space Conference

The *Space Conference* is closer to simulation games in business training with some goals targeting the standard business simulation topics: negotiations, compromises, contracts or even conflict scenarios leading to war and embargos.

⁷ This refers to the German reunion in 1990, as well as the causes, time of separation and overcoming problem afterwards.

⁸ A scavenger hunt, also known as treasure hunt, is an outdoor game in which players follow hints and riddles towards a goal or location. These hints are often written on small, hidden paper notes but any kind of creative way marking can be used. Recently, following QR-code trails (Canvas Network 2013) with a smartphone has become popular.

Only in this case, the young students roleplay alien nations meeting at an intergalactic conference. Designed as a one-day workshop to foster tolerance and prevent right-wing extremism, the space conference can be played with a school class divided into different groups to represent various alien nations. Each of these alien nations has its own secret greeting, religion, political and cultural customs and goal. Within each group, individual students take the roles of consuls, religious and political leaders, or soldiers. Similar to aliens in TV series like *Star Trek*, there can be multiple problems in communications. Language barriers, different cultures and customs, make it hard to negotiate for economic trade and peace. These conflicts become apparent during the game phase when the conference takes place, and it is the task of the students to keep it peaceful and find compromises. However, escalations and failure are possible,⁹ and even violent escalations can be played out, within previously discussed safety rules, with toy weapons (LokalPlus 2015).

4.3 Open access: One Night Drama

Drama game¹⁰ events are held by several organisers for an extended weekend each year and offer multiple small larps during that time. In the style of *barcamp*¹¹ slots, the mini larps are offered and led by the participants themselves. These events need to be booked and fees include the costs for staying overnight (ifol 2019). The Waldrutter e.V. concept, *One Night Drama*, is an activity offered once a month for one evening and is suitable for participants aged sixteen and up. A small fee covers the costs for drinks and takeout dinner. It is generally open for everyone interested to join, with or without sign-up, and focuses on only one drama game for the night. Participants can suggest topics and games for the coming months. This activity is meant as a low threshold entry into the world of larp, but also for experienced larpers to view beyond the known games and try different games each month (Drama Games 2019b).

4.4 Political Gaming: Die Mauer (The Wall)

⁹ This is based on the principle of “Let your game go”. The game designer cannot control the players, so the plot may not develop as intended.

¹⁰ Drama games is another term used to refer to chamber or mini larps, with an emphasis on emotional experiences. These are short, scenic larps with little to no material needed (Drama Games 2019a). Postcard larps can be as short as 10 minutes, while drama games, those with an educational goal in particular, may have a runtime of several hours.

¹¹ Barcamps are open, participatory conferences, in which the participants provide the content. Commonly, a board with empty time slots will be filled in during the beginning session by participants who would like to invite others to a discussion, workshop or presentation (Eisfeld-Reschke, Preyer, and Seitz 2013).

In 1961, only two months after Walter Ulbricht spoke his famous words “*Nobody has the intention of building a wall*”, the construction of the Berlin wall began. Although the separation of families and the country at large only lasted for twenty-eight years, more than 200 people died trying to flee the East German part and, up to this day, the rift in German society is still noticeable. The edu-political larp *Die Mauer* (The Wall) was designed to rebuild the wall in-game and to let young adults experience the feeling and situational crisis of that time. Over the course of three days, the participants learn about the historical context during a pre-workshop and are prepared for the game. A setting is built cooperatively, including the wall and surveillance perimeter, with mines and fences, as well as watch shift plans for the soldiers. Players can decide to be civilians and escapists or soldiers and spies, trying to prevent the escape. Each player develops a background story, motivation and morals for their character, intertwined with those of the other players’ characters, in order to cause conflict and dependency. The game itself is set in a pub near the border, on November 27, 1985, and played on Saturday night, from dusk to dawn. There is no overlying plot for all, rather, based on the real situation, each individual has their own story, trying to find a solution and get across the wall or to prevent people from crossing. The intense experience, including high alert tension, temporary arrests, and possible ingame deaths, is concluded with an in-depth group reflection and debriefing on the final day (Moritzen and Steinbach 2012).

4.5 Going Big: Projekt Exodus

In 2015, BASA e.V.¹² in cooperation with Waldritter e.V. members, initiated an innovative educational project for young adults, supported by the *Federal Agency for Civic Education*, and scientifically accompanied and evaluated. *Projekt Exodus* was inspired by the Swedish project *Monitor Celestra*, using elements of the setting of *Battlestar Galactica*, a science-fiction TV series. The eighty players experienced a social spaceship setting for two and a half days on the *Mölders*, a former destroyer of the German navy, which now serves as a museum ship. The playtime was divided into eight hour long episodes to simulate the flow of time and build up different plot strands. Notably, the game was intentionally developed as an educational larp and focused on the personal experience and social conflicts of a group of humans being confined and isolated in space while fleeing persecutors. Consequently, the actual gameplay was surrounded by one and a half days of pre-workshops and a final

day of debriefing and reflecting on the experience. Due to the intensity of the gameplay, no underage players were allowed to participate (Jaensch 2015; Basa e.V. 2015).

4.6 Live Alternate Reality Games

Projekt Prometheus, originally a game of its own, has become an umbrella term for ARGs held in different towns and settings. The basic concept stays the same: urban gaming, combining a scavenger hunt with roleplay elements, in a location-bound setting, blending fiction and reality. The games are played across an entire town, usually during the course of an extended weekend. Players try to solve a fictional plot by finding clues, solving riddles, and investigating suspects. An important aspect of the educational concept is the methodical focus on the media-shaped lifeworld, the interactive usage of media and gaining of critical media competencies. Digital information, newspaper articles, or even hardware devices can be manipulated and need to be used with caution. Politically-informed, controversial plots demand critical thinking and rational positioning. For example, *Projekt Prometheus* used a layered terrorist plot in which a suspect had to be found guilty or acquitted, and a bomb explosion had to be prevented (Projekt Prometheus 2019). *Die Bewegung* (The Movement) pulled the player into the conflict between an extreme right-wing group and a radical left-wing group. Ethical dilemmas and different political positions were used to have players experience different perspectives, question values, and reflect critically (Grüter, Lange, and Skamnioti 2014). In *Green Impact*, the players find themselves in the roles of investigative reporters trying to uncover a large-scale environmental catastrophe (Projekt Prometheus 2019).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this paper, to give an insight into the background and practices of a selected larp organisation, is limited. Only a glimpse of recent and past years can be shown. Among the many voluntary and commercial organisations in the larp scene, Waldritter e.V. is an example of one that operates in both fields. The association has found its niche and, according to conversations with staff and volunteers, also a fulfilling purpose, in developing and working with creative, interactive methods for public child and youth services. Through effective use of public funding, a highly motivated team and well-designed, thought through educational concepts, Waldritter e.V. has been able to run a rich variety of larps and RPG-informed games for over twelve years, improving and growing as time goes by. Whether this approach can be applied to public

¹² Bildungsstätte Alte Schule Anspach. BASA e.V. is an educational institution in Anspach, Hesse, and a frequent supporter or partner of Waldritter e.V. projects.

and social funding structures in Japan or other countries will need further evaluation.

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