

Implementation of a Social Safety Team at the “Drachenfest”

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Abstract

A social safety team, called “social harassment support team,” found implementation at the “Drachenfest,” one of the largest European larp events with around 5,000 participants. Such a team seemed necessary due to an increasing societal awareness of problematic social behavior and thus, an amplified demand for a solution to deal with such issues at larps. The “Drachenfest” as a unique and challenging environment called for the implementation of something not yet described in earlier research about social safety.

This paper will detail the implementation of a social safety team as a best practice example. It will consider questions of how to put such a team together and how to write an accompanying code of conduct. The paper also describes standard procedures for the work of such a team. The team performed admirably but still offered valuable lessons for improvement. The paper seeks to illustrate these lessons to strengthen attempts at implementing social safety teams at other events.

Keywords: Best practice, Drachenfest, Germany, larp, social safety

要約

約 5,000 人が参加するヨーロッパ最大級の LARP イベントである「ドラッヘンフェスト」では、「ソーシャルハラスメントサポートチーム」と呼ばれる「ソーシャルセーフティチーム(倫理問題対応チーム)」が導入された。これは、社会的に問題のある行動に対する社会的な認識が高まっており、LARP ではそのような問題に対処するためのチームの需要が高まっていることから、重要な意味を持つようになった。また、「ドラッヘンフェスト」というユニークで挑戦的な環境は、社会的安全性に関する先行研究ではまだ説明されていないものを実装することが求められていた。

本稿では、ベストプラクティス(最良慣行)の例として、ソーシャルセーフティチームの実装を紹介する。そのようなチームをどのように結成するかの詳細と、それに付随する行動規範の書き方を示す。また、そのようなチームの作業の標準的な手順についても説明する。チームは見事に成功したが、実施の中で発生した教訓があり、本稿では、他のソーシャルセーフティチームの実施のためにそれらを提供するよう努力している。

キーワード：ベストプラクティス、ドラッヘンフェスト、ドイツ、LARP、社会的安全性

1. Motivation: What makes a Social Safety Team necessary?

Larp as an activity connects two or more people and as such has to deal with issues related to social actions. This means dealing with non-game issues like accidents or social incidents, such as harassment. With larp as a hobby increasing in popularity and player numbers, such incidents begin attracting attention. At the same time, a heightened societal awareness for unhealthy behaviours has led people to be more perceptive and aware of interpersonal problems. That leads to a growing visibility of problematic behaviour.

Furthermore, people volunteering as referees/game masters are mostly enthusiastic larpers and trained in dealing with logistical and gaming issues, such as rule disputes. To better help with these (still rare) incidents it deemed more practical to train

(or form) a specialized team which supports the volunteers and frees them up for their main job.

This is especially the case in light of volunteers increasingly facing situations in which they have to handle situations concerning problematic social behaviour or sometimes even mental health issues.

For the above reasons the head organizers of the *Drachenfest* larp considered the implementation of a social safety team necessary.

2. What is the “Drachenfest?”

The *Drachenfest* (2002–19) is the oldest large-scale larp event in Germany (Schwohl 2013). The first “Drachenfest” took place in 2001 and developed over the course of nearly annual events since then. As of 2019, Germany knows three large-scale larp events (with more than 1000 participants) and with around



5000 participants the *Drachenfest* counts as the second largest of these events. Anecdotal evidence points to it being the second largest event in Europe (or even worldwide). All participants are required to wear costumes, not period-accurate but rather “fantastically cinematic,” so that costumes range from Roman legionnaires to 18th-century pirates, with most costumes drawn from classical imaginary like it is found in the *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954) or the wargame *Warhammer: Fantasy* (1983).

The main story of the event is a yearly competition between various (mostly dragon-themed) player camps. One opportunity to win this competition is based on physical combat between camps (often ranging from 500-1500 fighters), culminating in a “final battle,” where around 3000 fighters seek to be the “last camp standing.” Another (just as important) opportunity is to compete in solving riddles (drawn from the fictional backstory of individual camps or the whole *Drachenfest*), which can be social or crafts-based in nature or involve smaller physical skirmishes. Players from all over the world participate in the overall game, leading to variety and diversity playing cultures and background stories but also to language barriers.

In the standard *Drachenfest* rulebook (Wolter and Schlump 2017) a lot of detailed rules describe combat, magic or other skills. Only a few sentences detail social interactions (ibid, 57f). The authors describe here the so-called “oh mother” rule, which is used for better communication between players and as an out-of-game signal-word for less intense

roleplay. For example, if a player feels out-of-character harassed by an in-game would-be admirer, they can say “Oh, mother, you are pushy.” to convey their feelings without breaking character play.¹ In the “Terms of Participation & Game Conduct,” Wolter describes expectations for good roleplay, including definitions of and regulations for “extreme” behaviour, such as playing drunk or sexual innuendo (Wolter 2015, 5f). These terms of conduct, however, mostly rely on common sense and good judgement of the players.

This exemplifies a common approach for the German larp community: Social interactions are rarely explicitly regulated in the rules for larps in Germany. Such an approach differs from the consent-based play style in some larps described by Bowman (2017) and can lead to unclear boundaries in social interactions.

Camps and players tend to put a heavy emphasis on immersion and consistent roleplay. Even in very small groups people tend to stay “in character” (IC) and play out social interactions between characters. This is one of the main hurdles for new players: Even if the *Drachenfest* seems to emphasize the big camp fights, nearly a third of the (active) day is taken up by social interactions, ranging from shared guard duty (without any fights) to political manoeuvring between two camp leaders.



Fig. 1: Referees discussing a night battle.

¹ See Johanna Koljonen’s contribution to this issue (pp. 3e-19e) for more on calibration techniques.

In character play is very important to most players at the event and sometimes participants even forget their personal, out of character, needs. Especially with beginners, the clash between character traits and needs (in character – IC) and the real person behind the character (out of character – OOC) can become the source of a multitude of issues to be handled by the referees.

The organizational structure of the *Drachenfest* relies heavily on volunteers. These volunteers, called referees (Wolter and Schlump 2017), are arbitrators for rules decisions as well as logistical supporters for the camps. Every volunteer is equipped with distinctive clothing and a personal radio, as well as miscellaneous gear (e.g. flashlight or band-aids, cf. Figure 1). Before the event, referees have to attend various workshops, for example, on “being a battle referee” or “de-escalation training.” As they are volunteers, most of them have only limited time to participate in such workshops, so an informal mentoring system is also used, where newcomers are deliberately paired with more experienced referees.

To summarize the above and highlight two important considerations for the given topic of social safety:

1. *Drachenfest*, like many German larps, has no extensive regulations for social interactions but the game design relies heavily on them. For that reason, a lot of social interactions happen, which lead to more opportunities for interpersonal problems (Brown 2017a).
2. Large-scale larps like the *Drachenfest* are rare (Engelhardt and Weber 2018) and need a particular approach not covered yet in the existing safety research (Bowman 2013) or consent-based playstyle best practice examples. A fitting approach not only needs to cover the particular demands, but also has to work seamlessly with the existing organization.

3. Rules of Safety: How to write a Code of Conduct?

After considering available resources about safety (for example, the five aspects of building a healthy gaming community; Stark 2014) and the special circumstances of the *Drachenfest*, the organizers decided that the social code of conduct should be a manifesto with a few concise and important statements. To write such a manifesto, different persons, ranging from head organizer to long-time referees, were asked to pool their expertise. In this way, very different viewpoints and experiences could be consolidated to write six statements altogether. See Sidebar 1 for the six statements as they were stated by the organizers.

The first point is a clear statement that immersive roleplay is not the highest value at the

Sidebar 1: Drachenfest Manifesto

1. Out of game concerns surpass in game concerns: The out-of-character (OOC)-well-being of our participants is our highest value. If you have a real predicament, you can always go to a referee or withdraw from a scene.
2. Discrimination is unacceptable: We oppose any form of discrimination based on OOC features of other players. Classic examples would be sexism and racism, but of course any other forms of insults or degrading speech are included.
3. Protection of participants: We will always listen to the participants in case of a conflict and pursue a topic only with their consent. If someone contacts us, we will always treat it confidentially.
4. Listening and learning: We look forward to receiving your personal or anonymous feedback on our work. We know that through your feedback, we can learn a lot and expand our opportunities for good care. To do this, for the same reason, we go through regular internal feedback loops throughout the entire referee team and with the organization and organize internal training.
5. Support team for cases of Social Harassment: We have a team of people who are specifically selected as the point of contact for this topic. This team has the backing of the organizer and is made up of people from different groups to provide you with good care in as many cases as possible. You can contact the support team at any time, either in person or by requesting it through a referee.
6. Law and Justice: We are not the police or a court of justice. We will accompany and look after you and act in consultation with you, but we cannot deduce any truth or act beyond the boundaries of our event. We will assist you in your actions, if you wish.

Drachenfest. This is important because as shown in sec. 2, the larp community at the *Drachenfest* places a high value on impressiveness and can therefore unwittingly overlook the well-being of another player in favour of immersive roleplay. This also leads to a certain “I don’t want to bother anyone”-attitude which is common for new or self-conscious players (see sec. 1).

The second point is the core rule: What can be discriminated against was not clearly defined before this manifesto. For example: Female players who portrayed knights in the game had to sometimes suffer discrimination based on their gender (“no female knights in history”). This rule can seem self-

evident, but as past experience has shown, should be stated clearly.

The third point was directly inspired by Brown (2017a) and seeks to encourage persons to come forward by removing the fear of being put into the spotlight or forced to take some action (“9. Fear of Reporting and Fear of Reprisal Are Real”, Brown 2017a).

The fourth and fifth point also took cues from Brown (2017a; 2017b). As Brown points out, a safety team should be appointed and should have the backing of the organization as a whole and be able to listen and learn.

The sixth point is important not only from an organizational perspective (safeguarding against exaggerated demands like heavy interrogations or national denunciation) but also to again assure participants that the safety team will not overrule their own decisions and *only* accompany and support them in their actions, legal or otherwise.

4. Forming a Team: “Who is a Good Fit for a Social Safety Team?”

Judging from the manifesto the need of a social safety team, called “social harassment support team” or short “SHS team” became evident. This team was picked from the already available referees, with the requirements given in Sidebar 2.

A dual leadership of the team should also ensure that one responsible person is always available (day and night) and to better diversify the leadership of the team. In the case of 2019, diversity was limited to gender. Both leaders were chosen by adhering to the above points and also their especially profound experience with the “Drachenfest” and the confidence of the head organizers. The leaders received a special radio with the ability to be directly called (see sec. 6) and one of the two leaders was always “on duty” and reachable via a special “SHS team radio number.”

The process of choosing the participating members was not as easy as first assumed. Some of the volunteers that came to mind as candidates had not all character traits or were involved in discussions, that were not helpful for the goal that the team was aimed at. Sometimes other time-consuming duties during the event prevented a referee from being included in the team.

The team consisted in 2019 of 7 people (3 males, 4 females) with experiences in diverse fields like youth trauma support, dealing with mentally ill people, sexual psychology, paramedics and adult education. They were chosen by organizers and team leaders and then asked to participate in the team. The possibility of stepping down was clearly stated, so

Sidebar 2: SHS Team Requirements

1. Some background in the area of counselling or pedagogy. This could be from professional occupations or from former volunteer work.
2. The team should be as diverse as possible, at least in gender distribution (see Brown 2017b).
3. Every team member should have the same mindset. For example: A team member should not be motivated by a need for revenge or justice when dealing with a problem but only by the need to help the particular participant and support their well-being.
4. Team members should be able to reflect on their own emotional stress and know how to deal with stressful or emotional situations without collapsing themselves.
5. Team members should have a good understanding of larp in general and the *Drachenfest* in particular.

that nobody felt pressured to become a team member. At the event, we were able to add another team member to the team and therefore expand the options even further – an American social worker joined us, who had some experience with support teams for American events and could reduce the language barrier for the English-speaking participants.

All team members were publicly introduced, with a short summary of their specialties and a personal statement. This served to not only make the SHS team more visible but also to give the *Drachenfest* community faith in the capability and credibility of the team (see Brown 2017b).

When presenting the team members to the players and referees, some referees felt left out or hurt by the decision of the team leaders. One of the first tasks for the team lead was therefore to explain how people were chosen and console people that felt passed over

5. The Event: “How do Team and Code of Conduct Perform?”

All the information in sec. 4 and sec. 5 was disseminated to all participants before the event via newsletters and social media posts. Referees further received a short introduction in the mandatory workshops at the beginning of the event.

As indicated above, no previous attempts or research was available to guide the team during the event. The standard procedure given in Sidebar 3 was implemented at the beginning and re-evaluated a few times during the event.



Fig. 2: SHS team member and participant.

During the event, daily meetings were implemented to facilitate a better communication in the team. This was difficult because all team members were “dual use” safety team members, they all had their normal duties as referees, which interfered sometimes with meetings like this. These meetings were also used as downtime for the team members (which is important according to Brown 2017b).

Most interactions with participants were conducted in the field or in special referee areas in the particular camps (cf. Figure 2). Such an approach was due to the size of the *Drachenfest* area and chosen to give the participants a familiar setting.

The SHS team was also called to help other referees with bad experiences. It also had to mediate between referees in social safety situations. Such situations were originally not in the purview of the SHS team (and no rule in the Manifesto pertained to such situations) but became aspects of the daily work of the SHS team.

Every situation (at least every situation which was brought to the team’s attention) was solved without removing a participant and without further hurt caused to a concerned party. The team members

Sidebar 3: SHS Team Procedure

1. A participant with a particular problem approaches either any referee or specifically asks for support of the “SHS.”
2. The problem is recorded and the “SHS” team radio number is called.
3. The team leader “on duty” helps the referee with “first aid” and decides which team member is available and able to help in this particular situation.
4. The SHS team member arrives and either supports the referee on the spot or relieves them and takes over.
5. The SHS team member tries to solve the problem. For this, no standard protocol was available. Discretion and experience are very important at this step.
6. Afterwards, team members report anonymously and with a short summary to the team leadership which relays that information to the *Drachenfest* head organizers.
7. (Optional) If a problem is unsolvable or surmounts the capabilities of the team member, the SHS team either escalates the problem to the team leadership or, in special cases, the *Drachenfest* head organizers. Further steps have then to be determined

used their daily meetings to communicate their respective limits (for example, one team member recently had a child and asked to not be included in issues concerning small children) which helped immensely in reducing the emotional pressure. Thus, no team member was overstrained.

6. Evaluation: “What is to be Learned?”

A few lessons can be gleaned from this implementation:

The manifesto and the role of such a social safety team need to be disseminated early and broadly. In this case, some participants did not know of the SHS team until after the event. Future implementations should take that into consideration. Sometimes people hope to be on the team, who are not suited for it. The team lead should always be prepared to talk about a rejection for the team and the reasons behind it.

Team members must be selected carefully. In this implementation, a lot of care was taken, and a few hopeful applicants were rejected which resulted in a smaller but very capable team. The importance of team selection cannot be overstated because an unsuitable or inept team member will quickly reduce the credibility of the whole team.

A manifesto is a very difficult thing to write, especially as different larp cultures and the mindset of the whole event have to be taken into account. In this case, the manifesto was broadly accepted because the writers took great care to tailor it to the *Drachenfest* community. Future implementations have to always walk a narrow line between clearness and restrictiveness of such rules. Especially if no rules for social interactions exist, such a manifesto will grow beyond a declaration of intent and will take place of binding rules.

Team members should be freed from other duties for events of the SHS team. This should be supported by the organisation.

A social safety team must keep in mind that with an event like this and over 150 referees, interpersonal issues will emerge between referees or referees and participants. This should be planned for, especially concerning hierarchy issues. In this implementation, the team leadership was able to use formal and informal authority to facilitate solutions.

Since some members of the team were very clamped during the event, the meeting time was often cut short, which should not happen in the future.

Language barriers need to be seriously considered, therefore the possibility of including as many native speakers of as many different languages as possible should be taken into consideration.

7. Conclusion

The described case needed to take very special circumstances into account: No research or best practice example existed beforehand to help with the implementation as such big larps are rare. Further, most of the existing literature pertained to very niche larps (Bowman 2013) with particular and often expansive rulesets for social interactions. To implement a social safety team in the very unrestricted social roleplay of the *Drachenfest* necessitated much consideration and forethought.

The implementation can be counted as a success. After the event, unstructured feedback by participants and referees praised the organizers for implementing such a team. Even after the event the SHS team continued to work and supported participants and referees.

We thus conclude that it is not only possible to implement such a social safety team but that it is desirable by participants. As a lot of bigger larps must be economically feasible, it should be noted that participants who feel safer and more supported are more likely to return for future events.

For that reason, the authors believe that this model has a lot of merit and should be considered as a role model for future implementations.

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