

XAGA – The City Game / XAGA – The Village Game

A Novel Didactic-Methodical Concept for Urban, Rural and Regional Development

1. Objective, Development and Application Areas

A village within the city – that is how ever-growing numbers of urbanites wish their neighborhoods to feel like. More and more among those living in rural areas, on the other hand, would like to partake in the increased service and entertainment/amusement qualities that cities have to offer. Are the boundaries between urban and rural areas becoming blurred? The answer is both no and yes. Structurally and in terms of the respective natural environment, there will always be a substantial difference, and the internal differentiation into social environments or specific services will likewise remain different. However, the use and organization of urban – or rather social – and rural – or rather communal – forms of living will become increasingly widespread in every type of settlement, regardless of whether house and home are located out in the country, in a greater metropolitan area or in the city.

Development in rural environments, however, is given less attention than urban/Metropolitan areas. And yet, every urbanite will acknowledge that villages and rural areas offer qualities which can not or can only rarely be found in a city. Such special qualities are not limited to the characteristics of the natural environment, but are to a large degree characterized by the people's lifestyles, the manner in which they organize their daily life and their cultural reproduction. It is important – and this holds true equally for the village and the city –, whether people manage to find their own identity, to bring it to bear in common processes and to develop it further at the same time.

In order to support the process of identity formation, to generate ideas, to instigate communication between inhabitants and to initiate projects, the Leipzig *Netzwerk – Arbeitsgemeinschaft zur Förderung einer gemeinwesen-orientierten Sozialstruktur Leipzig-Südost e.V.* (network – society/study group for the promotion of a community-based social structure), in 2000, developed their first board game (The *Leipziger Messenspiel*). Its purpose was to provide new stimuli for an unused piece of property and to make the interdisciplinary topic of *community* accessible through a didactic tool.

Due to its great success (it was nominated for the *Deutscher Lernspielpreis 2002* (educational game award), for example) the Leipzig networkers refined their method and materials, before releasing, in the fall of 2003, *XAGA – Das Stadtspiel* (Xaga – The City Game) and *XAGA – Das Dorfspiel* (Xaga – The Village Game, developed in cooperation with the *Katholische Landjugendbewegung Deutschlands/Catholic country youth movement Germany, KLJB*) to the specialized market. In its first two years on the scene in Germany (and abroad, initially: *Xaga – The Village Game* was

included in the community work curriculum in Nicaragua and Cuba, for example), five application areas became evident:

- Civic participation in urban, rural and regional development
- Communication training and team building in enterprises, organizations and fundraising
- Family, child and youth work, school
- City marketing
- Neighborhood building.

It is still the intention of the game's inventor and manufacturer, *Netzwerk Südost e. V.*, to provide a broad target group with a supporting tool that is not just to be used under the supervision of a professional at specially scheduled meetings in central locations, but can be played and modified independently and with reference to the players' specific situation. What sets this tool apart is the way it connects both modes of access to a didactic game: first, it needs to be fun, and second, it needs to teach you something. The game's multiple benefits, i.e. common ideas and a multitude of competencies, have met with great acclaim among experts. "Xaga knows no winning strategy; instead, it provides you with a playful real-life experience which goes beyond your regular game experience." (in: *Spielbox*, issue 3/2004, p. 54), enthused Wieland Herold, *Game of the Year* juror.

The *XAGA Games* have been in use since 2003 in projects of *Netzwerk Südost e. V.*, but by third parties as well (e.g. in the *neu-Land* campaign of the KLJB). In 2005, game tournaments were held e.g. on the *Green Campus* at the *National Garden Festival* (BUGA) in Munich, at the Saxon village development project in Bad Lausick or during the development of the *Alles Dresden* version for the *ZukunftsWerk Stadt* workshop organized on the occasion of the city's 2006 anniversary (see www.dresdenspiel.com). For detailed information, please visit www.xagaspiele.de

Out of the development of the game grew the idea at *Netzwerk Südost e. V.* to establish, on the occasion of the society's 10th anniversary on July 7, 2003, a foundation named *Stiftung Agens. Initiative zur Förderung von Bildung und Kommunikation für ein gemeinwesen-orientiertes Handeln in Stadt, Dorf und Region* (Agens Foundation. Initiative for the Promotion of Education and Communication for Community-Based Action in Urban, Rural and Regional Projects). The foundation's objective is to enhance, in all of Germany, the know-how for tools in urban and regional development. The proceeds from the sale of the *XAGA Games* benefit the foundation and will contribute to future foundation engagements. Put in perspective, this establishes a sustainable structural approach for the promotion of new learning cultures, particularly through the development of new tools.

2. How the Game Works

Now, how does one describe these games in detail – games which, incidentally, have been recognized as an official project of the *UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development*?

Above all, they are very colorful! There is a red solar residential tower, then there is a blue lawn for sunbathing, and the public bathroom next to it is an alternative rainwater toilet in yellow. Red, blue and yellow? This village made out of multicolored Play-Doh (or Plasticine) and with lots of creativity is located on the game board of *XAGA – The City Game*.

XAGA – The City Game (and *XAGA – The Village Game*) is a creative-strategic board game. While playing it, the four to six players form, out of multicolored Play-Doh and using their ideas and strategies, their city or village of dreams, as it were. Diversity is desirable in this game, because it is not about quantity, but about the quality of the common living environment. On the baseplate of a fictitious city (or rural community, depending on the case), the players form buildings, facilities and so forth, trying to attract new inhabitants and guests, courting their favor. An attractive location requires more businesses or an appealing playground, a fruit orchard or a new market layout? Building them out of Play-Doh alone will not be enough to attract the other players to one's own buildings. Clever advertising is crucial to win the game.

Constantly switching roles between investor and inhabitant, the players together create their own community formed by imagination and strategy, experiencing the complex web of relationships that constitutes a rural or urban community as well as the dialog between each other regarding their different points of view on quality of living and life. Communication is very important in this game. And “in passing”, the players also get to know their different perspectives and interests better. At the end, the election for freeman determines who will win the game. However, to win the title of freeman, a player does not only require election cards such as “Has built the most”, but also “Most attractive building” or “Most disruptive neighbor”. All things considered, everybody wins in the end – gaining new ideas and having enjoyed a pleasant communal gaming experience.

While complex development processes in all their dimensions cannot be exactly reproduced within the confines of a game, individual aspects of urban or rural development such as aesthetics, neighborhood, communication, community and their web of relationships can be retraced or understood playing. Shaping Play-Doh as a game move forces the other players to be active, to really organize and act and, hence, to communicate directly about what has been created, i.e. to address the other(s), the player(s). Thus is formed a process of dialog and negotiation pertaining to various interests and concepts of what constitutes an attractive living environment. The game itself has no ideological agenda. Topics such as ecology or cooperation are suggested, but not forced, via event cards. The event assignments and the associated historical background stories as well as selected best-practice examples from throughout Germany provide the necessary stimuli. The games' scenarios and dynamics, however, are determined by each respective team of players anew. The

game thus adapts to its players. And what eventually forms is not the ideal theoretical village (or city), but the common idea of an actual place worth living in.

It has been the explicit objective to develop a playful approach as a “low-threshold opportunity/offer”. The experience gained over numerous game rounds shows that this goal has been accomplished: The board game actually makes urban and rural development fun, as it turns both the concerned inhabitant and the non-concerned bystander (e.g. the tourist) into players approaching realities through individual ideas and imagination. In the game it becomes evident that joint planning by different “active parties”, i.e. interest groups, is an asset to the community – not only as regards urban and regional planning!

3. The Tool's Special Qualities

Both board games – *XAGA – The City Game* and *XAGA – The Village Game* – are innovative tools for intermediary action that, via their game concept, initiate and/or consolidate communication and mediation processes. Among the players, they trigger learning processes that go beyond getting to know each other's needs, interests and positions, but at the same time, during each round, “provoke” both each player's and the entire team's joint activity, thus supporting the development of competencies on several levels at once – individual, team, organization, regional. In a playful manner, players can fathom out participation and cooperation in an uninhibited creative atmosphere, developing a common language that paves the way to a new understanding of different perspectives between the players/game levels. In other words, the players go through a learning process that turns the various aspects of community development into a tangible experience and guides them to new ideas and perspectives with regard to their own community and regional planning activities. “Entertainment and Stimuli for Rural Communities”, ran one of the headlines in the April 16, 2003, edition of the regional *Döbelner Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper following a round of *XAGA – The Village Game* involving local kids and regional players at the Naundorf/Saxony youth community center.

“Model, Advertise and Win” is the game's tag line. The term “Learning” is not explicitly used. And yet, it is exactly the game's promise of pleasure and fun that leads to multidimensional learning processes.

The newly developed game concept with its various strategies and moves requires a multitude of talents such as: information, organization, advice, association, communication, supervision, observation, analysis, reaction, assessment, planning, strategic thinking, selection, final analysis, and hence networked thinking which makes the complexity of planning processes physically tangible.

What is of fundamental importance here is that the game's methodology helps make way for creative thinking and action through handling as well as planning/organizing

with materials (e.g. Play-Doh) and through communicating (e.g. advertising). Unlike other games dealing with urban and regional planning (e.g. *Monopoly* or *The Settlers*), this game offers creative freedom. There are only very minor organizational constraints – for instance in the choice of material (Play-Doh) and in the game's rules (instructions), the latter intended to direct the players' attention to specific topics, criteria, other players, problem zones. It is not the quantity (e.g. of development) that is important here, but rather the overall quality of the location created. And it is not only economic criteria, i.e. potential profits, but rather different qualitative aspects (e.g. neighborhood, aesthetics, charitable benefit) by which the game's outcome is judged.

The game's concept, apart from analytical skills, appeals to the players' ability to communicate and their creative potential. Furthermore, it conveys knowledge, indirectly via planning processes through the game's progression, and directly through the short descriptions of actual best-practice examples matching the individual problems presented to the players at the outset. This promotes a multitude of competencies and their combination.

The game is considered superior to other forms of participation (e.g. discussion, "Planning for real", planning cells, etc.) in that:

- it encourages people to act: independently, physically organizing and creating (Play-Doh)
- it knows no organizational constraints, giving only a few directions in terms of issues to be dealt with, to encourage the players to develop their own narratives
- it can be played without the guidance of a professional/specialist
- it creates a high degree of interaction
- it is mobile and can therefore be used in the most diverse of communication situations (no expenditure in terms of hardware/location required): in public meetings (e.g. planning workshops, public participation, etc.), within the family or in the company of friends, in non-public planning processes (administration, politics, economic forums, citizens' committees), in education facilities, sociocultural facilities, enterprises

4. The Game in Action – An Example

Since the *XAGA Games* were first released on October 3, 2003, on the occasion of the Leipziger Spielefest (Leipzig Game Festival), they have been used in several projects dedicated to finding applications, to drawing conclusions about their effectiveness and evaluation functions. These applications have been (and will in future projects be) combined with the preparation and further development of methodological aids for the games' application in intermediary projects as well as with the training of multipliers. Further development and application procedures will be handled by the games' creators, *Netzwerk Südost e.V.*, e.g. in the

Management für regionale Lernkulturen (managing regional learning cultures) project within the framework of the *Lernkultur Kompetenzentwicklung* ("Learning Cultures and Competence Development") R&D program (2001–2006) . The R&D program is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the European Social Fund (and is operated by the Association for Research in Professional Development (ABWF)/ Management of Qualificational Development (QUEM).

To support the use of the game and the distribution and effectiveness of this tool, *Netzwerk Südost e.V.*, in cooperation the project team, are planning to prepare and hold seminars for multipliers. They will fill the important part of the intermediary in the community: the mediating function of intermediary job experience, innovative learning arrangements and the enhancement of their effectiveness through distribution. Thus, it will be possible to respond in a practical and lively fashion to requests for learning aids/tools for supporting regional learning cultures and to further develop these aids/tools.

What follows is a short description of *XAGA Games'* exemplary use by the *LEA Grimma* learning and development agency of *Netzwerk Südost e.V.*:

The LEA project entitled *Neue Wege im Gemeinwesen. XAGA – Das Dorfspiel: Spielend zur Entwicklung im und am eigenen Ort beitragen* (New approaches to managing communities: XAGA – The Village Game: Contributing to the development of your community and its surrounding area through playing) took place in the fall of 2003 in Altenbach, a rural part of the Saxon community of Bennewitz, which had been affected by the 2002 flood. The brochure of the same name prepared for the occasion describes, using Altenbach as an example, step by step the actual progression of the multi-stage participation project which, through its *Play – Discover – Implement* stages, takes up the playful concept of XAGA to develop concrete projects. The game's stimuli, for instance, aim at finding original (event card) stories in the actual community and hence at getting the villagers to deal with the Game's card categories such as learning, cooperation, ecology, etc. Out of the game's situation in Altenbach grew discussions on opportunities and problems which, in turn, certainly fueled further discussions in other communities in Saxony as well as in other regions. Topics such as the dearth of apprenticeships and migration were put on the table, the lack of a community center which could serve as a basis of a living community, the problem of waste disposal, or the lack of information in the village. As a result of these discussions, Altenbach will, among other measures, organize a fundraising mailing campaign for the renovation of the local church, the *Spritzeisfläche* (temporary ice skating rink) youth project and, above all, further project development meetings. The brochure makes the project comprehensible everywhere, i.e. it enables – by means of a description, printed matter for copying and a cutout sheet – everyone to use it, regardless of which community they live in. The brochure in the A4 format can be ordered from *Netzwerk Südost e.V.* by sending them a stamped and self-addressed envelope.

In the story section of the *XAGA – The City Game* event card containing the assignment to make the city more kid-friendly, German educator Friedrich Fröbel is

quoted as follows: "Playing games is the key to the outer world and at the same time the best instrument to awaken the inner world."

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