

The Theater of Games

What's the difference between a simulation and a game, I ask, rhetorically speaking? "A game you play over and over again," I answer, metaphorically. "Most simulations, you play once¹, and then debrief."

Aside from that, there really is no difference worth mentioning. Certainly less worth mentioning than the stunning similarities twixt the two: the simulation and the game. Especially between the good simulation and the good game.

Let us begin, if we haven't already, by mentioning the idea of:

Deeply Played Games

The games that we play the most deeply, as kids or adults, the games we play hour after hour, day after day, year after year – these are the games that are the "good" ones, these are the games that affect us most deeply, and in these games we can find the bits of cultural DNA that are most deeply embedded into our collective psyche, so to speak, as it were. In Tag, Hide-and-Seek, Checkers, Football, we develop a common understanding of fairness and cheating, leading and following, winning and losing.

The good games. The games that get played deeply. The deeply played games.

Playing them over and over, we begin to understand the game itself. Playing on different sides, in different positions, we begin to see the whole of the game, the web of strategy and counterstrategy, of trying to tag someone, of trying not to be tagged, of hiding *and* seeking.

Deeply played games are games that we, for a time, can almost give ourselves over to completely, just about abandon ourselves to totally, get very close to divorcing from all other realities, embracing entirely, more or less. And the more we, as they say, "give it our all," the more fun we seem to have. And the better we become at playing them, at understanding them. The more grace we can bring to them. The more of ourselves.

¹ Garry Shirts points out "I think the kind that can only be played once are the "Aha" kind. Because once the aha is discovered, learned, absorbed, it is like reading a mystery book twice. But there are many simulations that can be played more than once. Harold Guetzkow's Inter-Nation Simulation can be played over and over. Our Guns or Butter simulation can be played more than once, in fact we encourage it."

That's how the games take on deeper and deeper meaning for each of us, how they become more and more a part of our very own personal identity.

For the majority of people within a given culture, the deeply played games are the same. Here in the US, until about 20 years ago, we had basically 3 deeply played games. We had football, basketball, and baseball. Just about everyone in this country played those games deeply enough to become profoundly inspired and permanently scarred, where we became intimate with the very definition of teamwork, the power of the tribe, the shame of failure, the meaning of success.

It is in the deeply played games of a particular culture that the theater of games becomes most evident, and most elaborate. The theater itself (arena, stadium, gym), the players, the spectators, the vendors, the musicians, the dancers.

Each culture seems to have its own deeply played games, and some deeply played games are common to many cultures. I exemplify:

Football and/or soccer

Take, for example, football and/or soccer. Currently, in almost every country other than the United States, there's soccer. Which, every country other than the United States calls football.

One doesn't have to delve very deeply to note the differences between the two games, between U.S. and world football. When we Americans say football, we're talking about a game of complex strategy, of the coordinated performances of carefully calculated, precision executed "plays," and, most significantly, of smashing into each other.

It's the brash, energetic, puppy-like play of a young culture, a game of total engagement, barely kept within the bounds of play, it's highly organized, thinly disguised play fighting.

The game we call soccer demands a different kind of relationship, less confrontational, more flexible, demanding agility and responsiveness, not brute strength, but the strength of endurance and control. It is played in cultures where adaptability is very obviously a more useful strategy than confrontation. And in those cultures, it is played everywhere - in the streets, the alleys, the public parks, the subway, everywhere there's a ball and people with feet.

Chess and Go

Then there's chess, on the one culture, and the Japanese game Go on the other - a game of piece-capture vs a game of territory-capture, hierarchy vs. the horde, army vs. terrorist. While chess is the game of kingdoms and military might, the game of Go, according to the author of *The*

Protracted Game, is a remarkably useful paradigm for understanding Maoist Revolutionary Strategy, for example.

Deeply played games are a kind of cultural theater with massive audience participation, capable of expressing as well as developing identity, communicating as well as transforming the acknowledged values of a culture.

Kids games

There is a kind of parallel culture, in which games are played just as deeply, with just as profound of a drama, but they don't take place on a public stage. It is a transnational culture, with even more games, and players, and places of play. Some of their games are local, some global. Some of their games are as old as human awareness.

This parallel culture? Childhood.

Their games?

Hot Bread and Butter

Let me tell you about one in particular a game called "Hot Bread and Butter." At least that's what it was called 35 years ago, in Philadelphia.

I was teaching some new games to a group of elementary school kids. And, whenever possible, learning some more games from them. One day, the kids started telling me about a game called Hot Bread and Butter. I had never heard of the game. But the kids had. And as soon as they started talking about it they wanted to play it. All 25 of them. And I had asked them to teach me a game, and promised that they could play whatever, if they all really wanted to play it.

Yup. Hot Bread and Butter. That was the game they really wanted to play. But first, they needed a belt.

A belt?

Yes. A belt. And only a belt. Not a Boffer, which is part of a set of plastic foam swords that I just happened to have squirreled away for who knows what play emergency. I tried the Boffer. I showed them how swordlike it was, how loud of a bang it made when it hit something. I got muttered at. I asked what was wrong and one of the boys told me that I was supposed to use a belt. In my best voice of adult wisdom, I expounded on the Dangers of Belts. I then rolled up a section of newspaper. Bigger bang. More mutters.

"All right," I said, we'll try a belt. But first, whoever doesn't want to play, whoever realizes how dangerous a belt can be, why don't you just move on up to the Safe Area by me." No one moved. "You all understand what I mean," I said. "It's really O.K. to watch a game if you want. A belt can

really hurt. I'll just wait a little longer to see if anyone wants to change his mind." I waited. "I'll go out of the room and come back." I went and come back. No one had moved. And then we played a game – with the belt.

One kid had the belt. The others gather at a place called “home.” Home. I mean, how metaphorical do you have to get? The kids at home have their eyes closed. The kid with the belt starts creeping quietly away, then running around hither and yon. He comes back. Without the belt. "Hot Bread and Butter," he says, "come and get your supper."

The children scatter like an exploded lightbulb, shattering into screams. Some stay close to each other. Others gallop into the frontier, probing the darkest corners of the room. More screams. Someone has found the belt! There she is, rushing around, twirling the belt over her head like a lariat, hitting everybody who dares be near. Everyone races home. Until the last one herds himself into the cowering mass. Laughter. Finally silence. Eyes closed. Listening. She hides the belt.

"Hot Bread and Butter," among other things, represents an idea of power. To gain power, you must 1) leave home, and 2) be lucky. Alliances don't seem to be of much help. Those who stay too close to home don't have much fun. But they also don't get hit.

Whoever is brave enough to leave home behind, and lucky enough to find the belt, gets to hide the belt next time.

"Hot Bread and Butter" is not played to simulate or dramatize anything. It is played because 1) it is fun, and 2) because it smacks of an increasingly familiar, not-necessarily fun experience shared by the society of children who play it. Which is what makes it such a powerful simulation. And such good theater. And so much fun.

In "Hot Bread and Butter" you gain power through risk and luck – not through direct confrontation – but only once the power has already been abdicated. As a child grows towards adulthood, which these children eagerly were, he is approaching the time in which adult power is left to him – if he can take it. It is the opportunity that he must seize, not the person that he must confront. You don't get the power of an adult by taking it from him. It must be discovered within the person of the child.

The belt was crucial to the game – not because of tradition, but because of the real power it gave whoever was holding it. And yet it remained a symbolic power. Nobody ever really hurt anyone with it. They just tagged each other with it. But the possibility, the potential for danger had to be there for the game to be fun. Just like grown-ups playing grown-up games, we could hurt each other, because it's for fun, we choose not to.

Most children who play "Hot Bread and Butter" are between the ages of nine and fourteen. When I tried to play it with younger children, the equilibrium was lost. Many children didn't leave the so-called home.

Those who found the belt either hit too hard or spent the round trying to keep the belt for themselves. I had a lousy time, and so did most of the children.

Duck Duck Goose

On the other hand, the younger ones just love playing Duck-Duck-Goose. "Duck-Duck-Goose"? Oh. That's the game where everyone sits in a circle and one kid, the Fox, taps each kid on the head and says "Duck" until she reaches the one kid she wants to get chased by. She calls the kid "Goose" and starts running around the circle. The Goose stands up and gives chase. If the Goose tags the Fox before the Fox can get to the vacated seat, the Fox has to start over again. If not tagged, the kid that got, so to speak, Goosed, is now the Fox.

A pointless game, perhaps, with no score and really no relevance to the deeper drama of everyday life. Ostensibly, that is, until you actually experience what it's like being a Fox, figuring out what kid to select – the fast one, the popular one, the one you want to be a friend with, the one you're already a friend with – or what it's like being a Duck, trying to look like you wanted to get chosen (or not). Too enthusiastic or blasé, and you stay a Duck forever. And when you're the Goose, just how hard, exactly, do you have to run so that you: a) look like you're really giving it your all, and 2) get to be the Fox?

Choosing and getting chosen, giving chase and getting chased, these are powerful, character-forming experiences, within which we explore the delicate balance of affiliation and friendship, the secret arts of popularity and anonymity.

Deeply Played Games and Simulations

Every game that gets played alot, every time we play it, is a simulation. Even if we play it just for fun.

The drama we find in a game that is good enough to play again and again is a drama charged with relevance, with striking similarities to the ways things work in the real world, to the patterns of relationship, the strategies that assure us success and survival.

But there's a difference.

Games get played over and over again.

Most simulations get played once. And then debriefed.

In games, the learning that takes place – and believe me, there's learning taking place all over the, um, place – gets processed informally, between games, and tested and augmented during the next game. And though there's a veritable panoply of implications and real-life connections to

explore, and though character gets formed and social strategies crystallized and inscribed into the cultural DNA, what's learned in the game stays mainly in the game.

Most simulations get played once, and then debriefed until what's learned in the game gets connected back to the daily truth. Usually, the debriefing focuses on the experience of the game through the lens of real-life. Like, for example, the racism. How real-life-like is that? And how interesting it is that you, even you, with all your playful cunning and conceptual clarity, could so easily become an impassioned part of that problem.

Star Power

There's a simulation called Star Power. A game, perhaps, but designed to be played only once. It's a learning game. A serious learning game, about a bona fide—ly serious thing, like, for example, racism, as a matter of exceptionally serious fact.

Oh, Star Power starts out fun, all right, like a game – at least at the start. A trading game. Kind of like trading baseball cards, only you trade chips. Between rounds, you get in groups, according to the value of your chips. And talk about whatever. Or plan. Unless you're the group with the highest score. Then you get to talk about how you're going to change the rules for the next round of trading.

Hmmm. Only one group, the group with the highest score, gets to change the rules. Still like a game, I guess. A lot like football/soccer, where only officials get to change the rules. Except in sports the officials don't play. Believe me you they don't play.

Meanwhile, there's Star Power. Which is what you're playing. Even though you know it's not really a game. And you just happen to be in the group with the highest score. And guess what kinds of rules you make? Guess who your rules are designed to benefit the most? And talk about drama! Guess what happens when you tell the people in the lower groups the new rules for the next trading round. Go ahead. Guess.

Now guess what happens the next round. Now that everyone has learned so vividly what it means to be in a high- or low-scoring group.

Scary how accurate the simulation turns out to be. A simulation with a theme as old as the species, where those who have more power, when given the opportunity to change the rules, make rules to further disempower the less powerful. Where the disempowered find themselves playing a game that, for them, for sure, isn't fun any more, at all.

A simulation whose truths have recently become publicly, painfully more self-evident, on a pretty much global scale.

But, like most simulations, it's a game, all right, except you play it just once, and then debrief. And in the debriefing you replay the game and your part in it. And the more effective the debriefing the more clearly you can see all the parts of the game, and all the connections between them, as if you had played it again and again.

And, like all deeply played games, that's what makes a simulation so powerful, so profound, so effective. It gives us access to the fun of it. The drama of it. The experience of playing it. Of being part of it, taking part in it. That's what makes it such good theater. That's what makes it such a good game.

As good as any deeply played game can get. As good as Duck Duck Goose, as good as Hot Bread and Butter, as good as soccer and football, chess and Go. And vice versa.

Which, I guess, is precisely my point.

There's a difference between simulations and games. Most simulations are games that you only play once. But they are games, nevertheless. Good games are inviting, engaging, challenging, dramatic. Good simulations are good in the same way - you are challenged, you become part of the drama, you become totally involved, you have fun - and then you debrief.



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