

GAMING SERVES AS A MODEL FOR IMPROVING LEARNING

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Placing the educational process in the metaphoric framework of games cultivates a learning environment and ethic absent in educational models derived from business. Conceptualizing education as a game restores enjoyment, healthy competition, cooperation, and discipline to teaching and learning. Despite its insufficient attention to critical thinking, the game metaphor offers a useful addition to the amoral understanding of education solely as management.

It may be that universal history is the history of the different intonations given a handful of metaphors. (Borges, 1964, p. 192)

Rhetoric and education suffer a shared plight. In attempting to establish themselves as “legitimate” among disciplines with recognizable canons (e.g., literature) or specific objects of research (e.g., history or the natural sciences), educators and rhetoricians have resorted to borrowing. Rhetoric’s attempt to climb beyond the status of an illegitimate stepchild to philosophy and drama is not new. Among Plato’s litany of indictments against rhetoric appears one criticism that seems especially damning in an era where quantity—or at least quantitiveness—can substitute for quality. Plato claimed that rhetoric, comprising the techniques of persuasion, cannot be a science (an “art” or *techne* in ancient Greek parlance) because it had no method. Without a clear-cut procedure to deliver results, rhetoric was reduced to a knack analogous to cooking (*Gorgias*, 462d-463a).

In a similar attempt to secure academic respectability, educators have tried to describe what they do metaphorically. This resort to metaphors is quite understandable. Education, like rhetoric, has no particular subject matter (Dewey, 1929, p. 48). Indeed, no subject has educational value until it is adapted to the learner (Dewey, 1938, p. 46). Adaptability lies at the core

of education and of rhetoric. Education adapts the subject to the learner; rhetoric adapts the message to the audience. But this malleability makes education and rhetoric ephemeral. Metaphors offer a way to make the educational process more concrete and comprehensible. While no single metaphor can capture all aspects of education, a carefully chosen metaphor can highlight important components of the educational process.

One popular metaphoric rendering of education frames the process in the language of business, portraying students as customers in a satisfaction-based endeavor. The choice of metaphors, however, is normative as well as descriptive. Aside from their explanatory power, metaphors can shape perceptions and expectations of what they describe. This essay suggests that the concept of gaming offers an accurate and appropriate description of the educational process. Furthermore, placing education within a gaming framework encourages cooperation, emphasizes excellence, and fosters values that a business-driven view of education omits or downplays.

A Declaration of Intellectual Independence

The idea that educators served as surrogate parents shaped much American educational policy and practice until the early 1960s (Masters, 1995). The decline of *in loco parentis* marks the need for a less parental way of conceptualizing

education. As educators, we must go beyond maternal nurturing to encourage students to think and act independently. Ironically, this declaration of intellectual independence comes at a time when educational institutions are de facto reassuming many parental duties. Inculcation of values, discipline, cultivation of manners, and myriad other tasks have been foisted upon schools as parental presence and influence at home have dwindled.

Despite the parental functions educational institutions have acquired, a central task of education remains: to wean students of their intellectual dependencies. In this sense, "teaching is not an agglutinative principle but a separating, a detaching principle" (Barzun, 1959, p. 133). Similarly, we must overcome the paternalistic mindset that equates education with trained obedience, thus rendering education the equivalent of training a pet to heel and sit on command—with the negative sanction of punishment for disobeying.

The disintegration of the family in America might signal a return to more structured educational relationships. As educational institutions from elementary to post-secondary levels are called on to provide what parents no longer can or will (sex education, morals, positive role models, basic functional skills, an appreciation for arts and culture), the *in loco parentis* doctrine might be due for resurrection. Educators and students know, however, that with crowded curricula and depleted budgets educational institutions often must attenuate rather than extend their domain over students' lives. Furthermore, the sixties should have laid to rest the idea that educational institutions simply extend parental influence and force conformity with established social views. Finally, the changing demographics of college and university populations make the *in loco parentis* doctrine or any other "caretaker" mentality less applicable to students whose mean age rises high enough to render adolescence a dim memory.

The Relationship Between Gaming and Education

The metaphor of games can serve as an alternative to treating students as children or consumers. Treating students as adults, while appropriate, leaves unanswered the question of what kind of adult relationships should be encouraged. Conceptualizing students as consumers fails to do justice to the process of education or to the mentoring relationships that education fosters (Schwartzman, 1995a). Unlike food, learning is not consumed, absorbed, then discarded. Far more than a series of discrete transactions, the mentoring ideal of student-teacher relationships takes form of an ongoing, mutually enriching dialogue. The ultimate goal of education, in fact, remains diametrically opposed to consumerism. While the "seller" anticipates and encourages continued customer dependence on the provider's services, the educator prepares students to become their own teachers, generating their own educational needs by means of intellectual curiosity. The metaphor of gaming, with students as participants and teachers as coaches, offers a fruitful way to understand the educational process.

If metaphors serve as models (Black, 1962), then gaming furnishes a model for education in two senses. As a normative model, it cultivates values of personal responsibility, mutual obligation, and fair play. As a descriptive model, gaming simulates patterns of ongoing human interaction. Their descriptive capacity separates games from sports, because sports do not offer patterns for structuring human behavior outside the context of the sporting event (McDonald, 1975). The discontinuity between sports and serious activity surfaces when we disclaim our actions by saying, "I'm just sporting with you." We ridicule someone by "making sport" of him, and sporting equates with helplessness when we become "the sport of circumstances." Attention now must turn to how the game metaphor in education functions prescriptively and descriptively.

Gaming is employed in a specific sense for educational settings. Gaming as a metaphor must

be distinguished from game theory, which determines the probability of particular outcomes in controlled settings. Game theory consists of mathematical models with little relevance to actual behavior (Shubik, 1975). Education, by contrast, certainly cannot predict outcomes with statistical probability. Furthermore, the sense of gaming presented in this context is cooperative rather than zero-sum. Education of one person does not have to occur at the expense of someone else. Games do carry the connotation of being competitive. The question is how to designate the competition. Zero-sum games treat other participants in the game as opponents and potential threats to each other's success. The entire field of transactional analysis (an unfortunate choice of terms given its commercial overtones) is framed in the language of games, but these games are primarily strategic manipulations instead of structures for learning (Berne, 1976).

When conducted fairly and rigorously, games enact an educational philosophy that promotes a cooperative ethic while preserving the thrill of competition. One cynical application of gaming to business warns readers that those "who keep trying to apply lofty standards of human relations in business may well experience a good deal of emotional turmoil....No game of strategy gives prizes for ethics" (Carr, 1968, p. xv). The same book, however, distinguishes the serious strategy of gaming from "one-upping" competitors, attempting to gain advantage at all costs. Apparently the concept of gaming does have its moral side, since pure manipulation is a game where even the winner loses once he or she becomes the object of someone else's manipulations. While playing games does imply competition, "the competitive [instinct] is not in the first place a desire for power or a will to dominate" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 50). The equation of gaming with "war games" limits the philosophy of gaming to a militaristic mindset that is inapplicable to less cutthroat environments. The ideal of gaming is to develop "a spirit that has to do more with realizing one's own potential than defeating, much less 'con-

quering, 'others'" (Keidel, 1985, p. 166).

The sense of gaming relevant to education is cooperative, with students and teachers teaming up against their sole opponent: ignorance. This focus directs competition externally, toward the environment instead of against other participants in the game (Shubik, 1975, p. 24). For a game to qualify as cooperative, it need not include equally beneficial outcomes for all participants. Cooperation describes the method of play; it is not a measure of the benefits reaped. Many situations beyond the classroom require all parties to suffer mutually, to bear the consequences and not just share the wealth. The widespread cutbacks of state aid to public education provide an excellent example. Even unpleasant outcomes, however, are more palatable if they are anticipated by everyone involved and result from cooperative effort. Educational models derived from the business world may not account for shared consequences or outcomes. Taking some liberties with Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poem, "Play and your teammates play with you/Buy and you buy alone."

Games, Relationships, and Responsibilities

"Caveat emptor" seems to be the controlling ethic of business transactions: a universal suspicion lest one get duped. Games, on the other hand, cultivate respect for the rules that structure play. John Dewey (1938, p. 52) mentions children's games as examples of social control that is binding but not coercive. The players recognize a mutual obligation to uphold the rules and a willingness to be bound by them. Of course the rules may be challenged, and gaming should not foster unquestioning obedience to authority. The rules of any game may be renegotiated. This very renegotiation depends on the parties being willing to settle on what would count as an agreement or suitable compromise. Restructuring the rules is not done arbitrarily. As the strikes in professional sports have shown, major changes in rules require participation by everyone concerned (although

baseball seemed to have bypassed the fans, minor leaguers, and commercial interests in spring training locales).

The total quality management (TQM) model, perhaps the most popular current educational framework derived from management, correctly identifies students as stakeholders in educational decisions. On the other hand, they are not the only stakeholders, and sometimes the interests of students must take a back seat to the needs of the community. Under the TQM framework, students operate as a market force to which educational institutions must adapt in order to survive. Such a portrayal of students, however, invests them with a misleadingly inflated sense of empowerment. Far from autonomously constituting the market force, students and the educational administration too often find themselves at the mercy of forces they neither originated nor control. For example, many states have implemented budget cuts across the board to all state institutions, including colleges and universities. To say that students drive the market under such conditions misleads students into thinking they have far more clout than they actually do.

A gaming orientation provides a more realistic sense of where students stand. As students already know, they are subject to certain rules, not just those of the university but the limitations society imposes on all its members. Students can influence and in some cases determine outcomes, but the role of students as players recognizes that they are not the final arbiters in all matters. The dialectic of control and autonomy in gaming approximates the rhythm between freedom and discipline that Whitehead (1929) identified as essential to education. He understood freedom and discipline as alternating cycles, with their relative emphasis changing to accommodate the student's maturation. Gaming incorporates freedom and discipline as compatible. The choice to play represents an agreement among players and coaches, a free accord to abide by the discipline of rule-governed activity (Carse, 1986) As a result,

education steers clear of penitentiary-style punishment or a chaotic free-for-all where students learn by compulsion, by chance, or not at all. Instead, gaming allows effort to be rewarded, fouls to be penalized, and excellence to be encouraged.

On a larger scale, the game metaphor encourages recovering a communitarian ethic of teamwork instead of individual achievement at the expense of others. Bellah et al. (1991) voice concern about applying commercial metaphors to education: "The idea of an 'education industry' that is simply responsive to market pressures...can encourage people to think of their lives in terms of purely individualistic aspirations" (p. 170). Nowhere does the student-as-consumer model leave space for the moral obligations students incur toward their parents (who may be entitled to some return if they have invested in the student's education), the community, their teachers, or their peers. Its moral vacuum has been recognized as a crucial failing of total quality philosophy (Harari, 1993). Pleasure with the product represents the ultimate measure of effectiveness, ignoring the common experience of having short-term dissatisfaction with something that proved rewarding in the long run (i.e., long past the ninety-day return policy). Although games are fun, the enjoyment lies more in the thrill of continuing play, not merely in the momentary glow of "winning" in a particular instance (Carse, 1986). Education resembles more a language-game played for the sake of enriching knowledge. It is instructive that when Wittgenstein (1958) developed the concept of language-games he never mentioned "winning." Wittgenstein was concerned more with the process of play than with outcomes. Similarly, education as a game calls attention to methods as well as results. Certainly players develop skills as they play. One such skill, regardless of the subject being taught, is control. Games do involve control, but self-control rather than manipulation of others. Thus the game metaphor comes close to describing the maturation process that accom-

panies education. Development of self-control amounts to disciplined performance, the willingness and ability to impose rigorous demands on the self systematically and attempting to meet them. The self-imposition of discipline represents the ability to achieve order without external rules, a lesson that allows students to structure their own games. Educational models derived from management offer few insights regarding the development of the person conducting the transaction. Instead, the major concern is with the transaction itself, on product more than process.

Gaming, therefore, stress the open-ended quality and continuity of education while TQM imposes an artificial point of closure—perhaps graduation—as the time to take stock and assess the level of satisfaction. The focus on measurable, short-term results not only may be inapplicable to education, but may run counter to a major educational objective. Aside from the “immediate and tangible purpose” of “guiding technical action” (e.g., equipping people with sufficient motor skills to perform designated tasks), knowledge “may serve more permanent, less visible ends by guiding thought and conduct at large” (Barzun, 1989, p. 111). Barzun designates these objectives as “know-how” and “cultivation” (1989, p. 111), and one’s degree of cultural development resists quantification. Dewey (1929, pp. 64-66) makes a similar point, warning that fascination with precise measurement overlooks whatever is not replicable or identifiable as a specific bit of information. In fact, obsession with quantifiable results alone has been identified as one major reason why TQM initiatives may flounder (Brown, Hitchcock, & Willard, 1994). The questions of which outcomes should be quantifiable, what kinds of measurements should be used, and what purposes quantification might serve are far more important than the numerical documentation itself.

The game metaphor expands the educational sphere to include other students and audiences (e.g., the local community, including potential employers of the students). How each individual

student conducts himself or herself in the game affects other players. For example, if a student fails to contribute to a group assignment, that behavior violates the team spirit and is grounds for a penalty. The mutual obligations of students form an important part of any course in communication; peer reviews of student speeches, interviews, and group assignments involve interactions geared to helping others learn. The student-as-consumer ethic, on the other hand, focuses on individual acquisitiveness instead of mutual cooperation. More than seventy-five years ago, the game metaphor was applied to business because neither pure altruism nor pure profit motive adequately described the principles of conducting business effectively (Frederick, 1920). Games exemplify the esprit de corps that lies at the core of cooperating within organizations. The principle of sportsmanship encourages excellence but never at the price of fairness. Participants must “play the game harder than ever before, *but with more sportsmanship*” (Frederick, 1920, p. vii, emphasis in original).

Pedagogical Advantages of the Game Metaphor

The game metaphor can add a motivational tool to the classroom if assignments are configured as play instead of work (Schwartzman, 1994). The thrill of competition in the sense of overcoming an obstacle—not in the sense of excelling at the expense of someone else—provides an excellent motivational tool to encourage participation (Shubik, 1975). “Let’s play” is far more appealing as a call to action than “Let’s work.” Play is fun, although the enjoyment results from effort and from immersion in the task. “Fun and games” does not deserve the implicit condemnation of the often-added modifier “just.” The fun of games renders play neither frivolous nor foolish (Huizinga, 1950, pp. 5-8). The fundamental difference between play and work lies in the degree of freedom accorded the participants (Huizinga, 1950; McDonald, 1975). Games proceed by agreement to obey rules, play fairly,

and play hard. The agreement to play hard directs participants toward the challenge of learning, recognizing that a game is both dull and useless if it is too easy. Games are not fun to play if the players always win. Simultaneously, players must know what it takes to win, with explicit guidelines for tasks.

Work is a chore imposed by an authority. This difference from play is fundamental. While the player easily loses track of time (e.g., students who want to continue discussion past the end of class), commercial metaphors lend themselves to the clock-watching typical among people who consider themselves indentured servants. Every teacher is familiar with workers and students who treat every workday or class period as a countdown to the end, marking time until their release from bondage. Except for shopaholics, purchases often amount to drudgery, the necessary evil resulting from malfunction or obsolescence. To the extent that being a consumer is fun, the enjoyment arises from the play-like character associated more directly with games. When shopping, one can lament over what the bank account cannot buy, or one can strut through the expensive stores, pretending that even the most expensive wares do not meet the standards of the imaginatively rich and famous. My adolescent friends sometimes acted out their fantasies as "play" consumers by test-driving Rolls Royces and other luxury cars far beyond the wildest stretches of their budgets. Being a consumer can be liberating, but only if the consumer controls the availability and quality of goods to be consumed.

Being a player encourages ingenuity within the bounds of structured activity. Rules do not prescribe outcomes, but they establish the bounds within which outcomes may be obtained. Rules are conditioned by the needs of students, the preferences and skills of the instructor, the objectives of the course, and the goals of the institution. The conditionality of rules affirms their contingency without rendering them arbitrary (Carse, 1986). If an instructor seeks to implement the game metaphor in class, then assignments as well as the

course description must contain directions for how to play the game (meeting standards) and how to win (excelling). Applying the game metaphor, therefore, requires offering explicit instructions for not only meeting base line minimal performance, but for achieving excellence (Schwartzman, 1994, 1995b). By offering explicit standards, gaming fulfills a major objective of TQM without importing the commercial connotations inimical or inapplicable to effective education.

In business, the customer is always right. In education, our responsibility as teachers requires us to point out that the student is sometimes wrong (Beaver, 1994). Adaptation is a two-way street. Not only must educators adapt to their students, but students must have the pliancy to adapt to their teachers. Many astute students already do this, choosing "pet topics" the instructor likes so assignments on those topics stand a better chance of earning a higher grade. This type of adaptation actually qualifies as maladaptation. It is a harmful game known as "Please the Teacher." The student learns little aside from an introduction to pandering. Education requires playing a different game, one that might have pleasure as its outcome but not its object. That game is called "Exceeding Standards."

One of the greatest dividends of the gaming metaphor is its maintenance of discipline without resorting to punishment. Even the literature on TQM recognizes that "improvement will occur only when everyone is capable of taking risks without the fear of failing" (Comesky et al., 1992, p. 22). In the context of games, a central principle holds: penalize the performance, do not punish the person. The teacher as coach enforces the rules uniformly, and they apply to everyone equally. If a student breaks the rules or performs poorly, then those actions should be penalized without stigmatizing the student as a failure. There is a dramatic difference between being a failure and doing something that fails. To label someone a failure qualifies as a comment on her or his worth as a person. An evaluation of failing performance

should reward effort as long as the player did not break the rules. The standards for evaluating performance can be more rigorous with the game metaphor than without it, because the criticisms are directed at play and not at the players (Dewey, 1938, p. 53). Competitive sports, although poor models for many aspects of gaming, do exemplify discipline without punishment. Penalties are assessed impersonally, by announcing the player's number and the nature of the violation. The players who equate penalties with punishment either do not understand the game or are labeled "bad sports."

Depersonalizing penalties could offer enormous opportunities for helping students cope with communication apprehension. Over the years, I have found that many of my students who suffer severe stage fright express their anxiety as a fear of personal rejection. For example, when asked what the worst consequence of public communication might be, they identify audience attitudes of derision. It is not surprising that one of the most common worst case scenarios for these students—and for most other people as well—is that the audience will laugh at them. That derisive laughter signifies rejection. The communicator has bared her or his soul and the audience has devalued that individual's personal worth. Similar scenarios undoubtedly unfold in interpersonal and group settings. If audiences were educated to apply the principles of gaming, that threat of personal ridicule would diminish. I have seen it happen. When the class consists of teammates evaluating the performance but reinforcing the worth of the person, the highly apprehensive students claim they feel more confident and exhibit greater confidence. Gaming can provide a reassuring context for implementing specific treatment measures such as systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring, and visualization. If the communicator recognizes that self-worth is not at stake, then fear of punishment (i.e., rejection or retribution) can be transformed into the less threatening concept of penalties on performance.

Limits and Lessons of Gaming

Games provide a heuristic framework for understanding the process of education. The game structure may be stated explicitly, with assignments and the course itself presented to students as games complete with rules of play, criteria for winning, and specification of fouls and penalties (Schwartzman, 1994). To be effective, however, the games philosophy need not be so transparent. In fact, a more subtle but still substantive incorporation of games could pre-empt negative reactions to the language of games. While students and other stakeholders in education (e.g., parents and administrators) might respond well to the influence of games, they may balk at the terminology, which they associate with triviality or gamesmanship.

The suggestion of a game analogy invites misinterpretation because of the negative connotations associated with gaming. Upon closer inspection, however, the adverse reactions to the game metaphor stem from aversions to contaminations of the gaming process. Games themselves are not inherently objectionable; they become so only when they are played or run unfairly (Carr, 1968; Huizinga, 1950). Children do not object to games. Quite the contrary, children crave games as long as two conditions hold: (1) the games are sufficiently challenging, and (2) they allow for fair play. Fairness does not even entail the promise or even probability of winning. Instead, the sheer joy of play offers an intrinsic reward.

If children have a natural affinity for games, why do adults often approach games skeptically, deriding them as evil or demeaning? Two sources of contamination generate a distaste for games: triviality and rigging. The trivial game has no clear object or is plagued with unnecessary and counterproductive rules. In much the same way as persuasive communication is dismissed as "mere rhetoric," the trivial game is reduced to "just a game" where the stakes are low or the procedures are muddied. This type of tainted game is what students have in mind when they express impatience with "playing the edu-

cation game." For them, a series of meaningless bureaucratic hurdles has been erected that, if they serve any purpose at all, actually impede learning. Trivial games can be eliminated if procedures receive adequate justification. A sufficient reason for a rule or method does not consist in the invocation of authority. Of course, authority can serve its purpose, and it comes in handy as a way to silence the infinite regress of "Why?" questions from a child. The adult finally answers: "Because I say so." Such authority moves, however, ultimately can stifle curiosity because the game's structure becomes an irrational structure imposed by powers immune to inquiry. The rules, fouls, penalties, and procedures must be clarified in terms students find rational. Note that student comprehension does not necessarily mean approval, as in the blithe assertion that everything must please the customer. Students should recognize the function of the course, the way assignments are designed, and the grading procedures. Unlike customers, the students also must be aware that they have the responsibility to exert effort and not just "get" an education—a key lesson for their longevity in the workplace. An education, like success in a game, is earned; a product is merely received.

The second type of contamination is the rigged game, where a particular individual or group is systematically favored or disadvantaged due to how the game is constructed. The best remedy for preconceptions that a game is rigged would be to demonstrate unwavering impartiality and directly connect rewards with performance. Again, the objection lies not with the game metaphor itself but with improper conduct of games. If students recognize that efforts get results, their motivation to play well tends to increase. Some of my most highly motivated students are those who failed the course then return to retake it. These students learned that they were not entitled to receive high grades for doing the bare minimum amount and quality of work. Most of them realize that grades are not "received" or "given" but earned. An excellent corrective for

the fear of rigged games is to instill the work ethic and practice it. Results come from effort, not from trying to circumvent or manipulate rules.

Every metaphor has its limits, and the game metaphor does not describe every aspect of the educational process. The focus on formal rules adds structure to educational activities but it insufficiently encourages the development of critical awareness. The formalization of rules can allow procedures for altering them, but such formalization can make the educational process appear as a monolith impervious to structural reform: "One can tinker with the rules, to be sure, but the basic pattern of the game is untouchable" (Bellah et al., 1991, p. 41). Certainly part of learning involves teaching the lesson of compliance, but students must not develop the impression that they are bound by timeless, objective rules that cannot be adapted to different educational settings or cultural contexts. A game metaphor must be implemented consistently enough to show that education has structure but should not ossify the rules into automatic "givens."

The remedy for constricting critical consciousness is to treat rules as binding but dynamic. The rules of the education game allow freedom within certain bounds, but they resemble "the grammar of a living language" because they can be tailored to a variety of circumstances (Carse, 1986, p. 11). To proceed successfully, the voices of the student-players must be acknowledged, and they must be taken into account when the rules are established or altered. If they are to learn, students must develop the capacity to question as well as comply. Coaching involves more than invoking the familiar authority appeal: "It's that way because I'm the teacher." Such a response treats any question as a personal challenge instead of as a request for justifying the rules (thus violating the principle of separating the person from the performance). No rules in a game are immune from justification. If there is no reason for a rule, it should be revised or eliminated. All teachers, for example, should have ready responses for questions about the format of assignments, the

structure of the course, and other policies. For learning to be a cooperative effort, the educator must be willing to justify and adapt as well as formulate rules.

The game metaphor is particularly appropriate for educational settings because it develops an ethic of disciplined excellence and shared responsibility. Far from being a cutthroat effort to get ahead at someone else's expense, the game of education describes an ongoing, fulfilling relationship between the students as players and the teacher as coach. In the sense that it should be played less for immediate rewards and short-term satisfaction than "for the purpose of continuing the play" (Carse, 1986, p. 3), the game of education is its own reward. That payoff cannot be reduced to commercial value.

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