

Anthony Zaragoza, a member of Evergreen’s Political Economy Faculty, introduces Dan Leahy’s “Strategy Games”

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https://sites.evergreen.edu/realhandbook/wp-content/uploads/sites/684/2022/03/Word-Press_RealEvergreen-EducatorsGuide-2021-singles-reduced_3-10-22.pdf

Strategy Games: The Role of “Reality-Inspired Strategic Interaction” in Teaching and Learning (2021)

With special thanks to Dan Leahy

Strategy Games: An Introduction

I have used a lot of games in my teaching; many of us do at Evergreen. In this piece, I am specifically talking about “strategy games,” which provide an excellent space to create opportunities for folks to bridge theory and practice. I believe learning can be fun and, in most instances, should be fun, though this “fun” is fun in its broadest sense and should also be challenging. These fun challenges should be capable of stretching participants’ skills and understanding, as well as provide opportunities to use those skills and make connections across knowledges. The fun engages students, allows for “flow,”¹ and creates opportunities for application, interaction and community building.

A strategy game centers around a scenario in

which participants play roles in various groups, for example, Big Box Store workers, owners of a regional restaurant chain, and employees of a local non-profit focusing on workers' rights. These role groups each make written "moves" on an official "move form," responding to the scenario and to other role groups. A move is a realistic and reasonable action that each role would and could perform.

When the time to develop moves is over, the moves are read aloud in the order they were submitted to the facilitator. Game play is for two rounds of "moves;" then usually "recent developments" take place, distributed by the facilitator. (These "developments" can be pre-scripted in advance or written to respond to game action.) Developments are read aloud – and groups make one final move. After the game, groups reflect on their own moves/actions and the actions of the other groups.

The purpose of these games is to take the ideas, questions, and knowledge that participants are gaining out of the texts and use them in relevant and realistic situations in which they can apply what they are learning. Strategy games are meant to offer dynamic and active learning, genuine engagement, and practice in more detailed and concrete ways. Like many popular education activities, these strategy games are designed to offer students a chance to have a shared experience that then can be reflected on together. Students step out of their roles and look at what happened, consider why they did what they did, and ask other groups to explain their reasoning behind their moves. We use such games to think through situations, prior to being in them. Strategy games are important because they teach actively; active learning uses the whole brain, body, and being in a more holistic way than just reading or talking. Such activities are at the heart of an Evergreen education because they put students on the road to bridging theory to practice, and provide

situations in which students have to learn across significant differences both in their work in the game as well as with each other.

Assignment Genealogy

Some of my own earliest school learning fun came through Science Olympiad² and Academic Decathlon. The quiz show competition of Science Bowl in Science Olympiad pushed me to read new science, develop question flashcards, and to look up new information for the questions that I couldn't answer. I learned basic principles of physics, engineering, and design in the egg drop,³ toothpick bridge, and mouse trap-powered car events, in which participants had to solve concrete problems and puzzles – not on paper, but in the world. These were so important to me for so many reasons, and have had a huge impact on my teaching. It was the game engagement that captured and encouraged me, and inspired me to think about learning as active and fun.

I learned strategy games from retired Evergreen faculty Dan Leahy, who used them in his work in union education and as Director of the Labor Center,⁴ among other venues in which people learned together about how to act together. I owe Dan a big debt of gratitude for all that we've done with this valuable tool. In the two programs we taught together, we used a total of five strategy games, and I experienced these to be rich learning experiences for faculty and students in the program – from the creation of each strategy game, to the playing of the game, and on through the reflection.

Strategic Use of Strategy Games

The game starts with a scenario. This has been the funnest part for me: coming up with the situation and developing the world in which the game play will occur – the scenario, the roles, and

2 My working-class factory-town middle school/high school were for a time the best Science Olympiad team in the state. We won the State Championship and went to the national competitions FIVE years in a row. In fact, one year we placed fifth in the United States.

3 Our goal in the egg drop competition was to keep from breaking an egg dropped from a height of about 20 feet. (We were provided paper and other materials.) The bridge competition involved creating a wooden structure that optimized the lightest weight of the bridge compared to the weight the bridge could hold up. Mouse trap car used the potential energy in the spring of a mouse trap to travel a prescribed distance as quickly as possible without crashing.

4 Evergreen's Labor Education and Research Center was established by the Washington State Legislature in July of 1987 with a mandate to provide access for union members in Washington to education and research opportunities at the post-secondary level. It became one of the college's Academic Public Service Centers; students and faculty worked closely with the Labor Center on projects and in programs. The Labor Center moved to South Seattle Community College in 2010 (Historical Note).

the recent developments. The best scenarios for student learning are connected to core themes and concepts for the course/program.

For example, we used a strategy game in the Tacoma course *Neoliberalism by the Numbers* to help make the abstract concept of neoliberalism⁵ more concrete for students and to see the various relationships, impacts and influences on decision making. *Neoliberalism by the Numbers* was the first course in a year-long series of linked courses at Tacoma, called *Neoliberalism in the Neighborhood*. In the fall we had the stats class *Neoliberalism by the Numbers* with Tyrus Smith, followed by the critical ethnography research course, *Neoliberalism in the Neighborhood* with Gilda Sheppard, and in spring the history and cultural studies course *Back in the Days: Political Economy through Hip Hop*. We needed to lay out the dilemmas and dynamics of neoliberal capitalism early on as we moved from quantitative angles to qualitative angles to cultural expression and responses. So in the *NeoNumbers* class, I introduced the major components of neoliberalism through a three-week series of presentations using photos, graphs, stories, data, historical documents, etc. Once we had some vocabulary and a sense of how these concepts were impacting people in communities and neighborhoods, I wrote up a scenario that looked at the implementation of a concentrated packet of neoliberal policies on a Tacoma-like city; I was taking things directly from the students' lives, from my research, and from real policies that were being put in place in Tacoma as well as around the country. Dr. Smith provided students with a statistical fact sheet that gave students some concrete data to use as they developed their strategy and moves. Students worked through what might be done in a scenario that paralleled the world around them while reinforcing –

through application – some of the key political economy, statistical, and historical concepts we'd discussed in class.⁶

For this and other strategy games, I used many of the things Dan taught me, like setting up the room in a way that captured and expressed some of the power dynamics, relationships, and ways of doing things that were appropriate for the scenario. In a large workshop space you put the power player roles at the center and near each other, while literally creating spatially-marginalized groups. For the neoliberal strategy games, I put the city council and chamber of commerce at large tables in the center of the room with an abundance of chairs and access to information. Groups with less institutional powers, such as a community environmental justice group and disempowered and non-unionized workers, sat at small tables with too few chairs in the corner or even out in the hallway. Sometimes, I would even “forget” to give them enough copies of the materials or cut them off when speaking to the whole group.

Strategy Gameplay and Debrief

The students, based on their learning, knowledge, wisdom, experience, and creativity, give life to the scenario and the roles. Through game play and making their moves, the less economically powerful (or otherwise disadvantaged) groups inevitably are able to overcome the symbolic structural barriers and often find other role groups to team up with to develop ways to exercise power and influence the outcome. Participants often come up with strategies to work together and use the leverage they have together to influence the actions

5 Since the early 1970s, the U.S. (like countries around the world) has experienced a process of economic restructuring. This restructuring is based in expanded corporate free trade, and has resulted in deindustrialization across the country, financialization of the economy, and the development of global economic governance structures such as bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (i.e. NAFTA) and international bodies (i.e. International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization), which enable the unrestricted movement of commodities. This has led to a massive growth in inequality both between nations and within them. Meanwhile, as peoples around the world must move to make a living, greater restrictions on immigration are imposed. I use the term “neoliberalism” to describe the package of economic policies, political priorities and ideological justifications that create and enable these changes. Though regional implementation varies, the package of policies usually includes de/reregulation, tax cuts/austerity, privatization, and market prioritization. It is accompanied by political policies that handle the resulting economic polarization, labor precariousness, and instability through the growth of a law-and-order state anchored in increasingly militarized policing, mass incarceration, and further military expansion. Ideologically there is a dominant tendency to undermine civil society, collective action, and governance for the public good, while fostering personal responsibility, punitive culture, glorification of wealth and fame, and the amplification and harnessing of fear. This economic restructuring redistributes wealth upwards while lowering wages, cutting the social safety net, and redesigning public institutions to facilitate profitability; the impacts disproportionately hit women and people of color, and the global poor generally. Neoliberalism represents the re-establishment of full-spectrum ruling class dominance by dismantling the Keynesian welfare state and labor accord. (Both of these emerged as responses to the Great Depression and growth of communism, both were boosted by U.S. entry into World War II, and both were developed further in the post-war period.)

6 Editor's note (July 2021): Dr. Zaragoza has made this game and others available in his Strategy Games Packet of Examples, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ezZxmD2zO5NGCmP3d-RUgzeaWJ0RRVE/view>.

of the more powerful groups. Meanwhile, the facilitator can put their finger on the scale in a way that influences the game play in a realistic way (offering tips, selectively sharing information, hindering role groups that are in disadvantaged positions, spreading rumors, encouraging alliances, etc.). Once I even had one student play a reporter who was gathering news (spying) and sharing information favorable to the power players.

The most important part of strategy games, and just about any learning activity, is the reflection that happens after. The reflection begins with the role groups getting together and discussing what happened, by thinking about two key questions: first, “Given the game’s outcome, next time we would . . .,” and second, “We want to ask these questions of the following groups.” Each group shares what they would do differently, and then they ask each other some of the questions they came up with. Finally, we have a bigger conversation, about the scenario and the key topics and concepts. Dan would often summarize the entire game so we could examine it as a text and reflect further. He told me the other day that the Quaker activist groups he learned this from would type the whole thing up, share it with participants, and save it in their archives. I’m not always able to do this now. But when I worked as the Gateways faculty, a teaching assistant typed up the games to share with the class. We read them and talked about them, and the play the next time around was more serious and focused. I believe that was due to the fact that we had experience with the game and each other, and we knew it was being recorded so wanted to take it seriously.

More Examples of Strategy Games in Evergreen Programs

In our Spring 2006 program *Reconstructing New Orleans: Race, Class and the Ownership Society*, Dan and I developed a strategy game for Week 7 in which the scenario focused on how the reconstruction of the city would proceed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The students had learned some history of New Orleans, and who the key figures were (including politicians, community groups, and corporations). They had also studied the forces of neoliberalism that were using Hurricane Katrina to further privatize the city and make it even more geared to profit and investment. The scenario involved

upcoming elections, planning commissions, federal recovery dollars, and a resistance group that had occupied various public housing units. The recovery scenario was centered on public-private partnerships to convert public housing into private residential areas, and the construction of various high-priced, state-of-the-art event centers. Students were able to connect past to present, politics to economics, and theory to practice.

In our course *Policing by the Numbers*, Tyrus Smith and I used a strategy game around policing and gentrification. *Policing by the Numbers* was a statistics class that took a deep dive into the statistics around killings by police and the relative danger of policing compared to other occupations, as well as police use of statistics. The students had done critical ethnography research around the various relationships that the community had with police and policing, in a course called *Serve and Protect?* that Gilda Sheppard and I did the quarter before. Tyrus and I set up a scenario in which the Hilltop was being gentrified and a police taskforce enforced the law leading to an incident in which a home was raided to carry out an eviction order. Tyrus provided a stats sheet that the students could use in their thinking about the scenario.⁷

During *Seeds of Change*, Alice Nelson, Martha Rosemeyer, and I designed a year-long first-year program that examined the intersections between food, work, and culture. Besides taking many incredible field trips around Washington state, we also had various interactive workshops and games that helped us deepen the connections we were making. We played a game called *Locally Grown Coffee – Only at Starbugs* in which a fictional Seattle-based coffee company developed “locally grown” Washington coffee to outflank the fair-trade cooperatives that had organized in Brazil and other parts of the world as part of a people power movement. The game allowed students to wrestle with the promises and limitations of locavore lifestyle liberalism, underdeveloped nations’ debt, and the power of corporations to dictate the terms of trade, among other key ideas and questions. Spoiler alert . . . In the recent developments for this game, it was discovered by progressive scientists that locally grown Washington state coffee was in fact genetically modified! Students used this game to attempt to organize workers and civil society across national boundaries and develop solidarity through a boycott of Starbugs.

7 Both of these scenarios along with several others are included in the Strategy Games Packet of Examples: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ezZxmD2zO5NGCmP3d-RUgzeaWJ0RRVE/view>.

Final Thoughts

Strategy games are fun, interactive, and often surprising. The games give students a chance to interact in new and active ways while offering a shared experience that can be reflected on together. In my experience, these learning opportunities provide genuine engagement as well as practice in thinking through a scenario prior to being in it. Fun and engaging learning activities can bring students in programs closer together while also allowing different learning modes to reinforce key content. Strategy games can help learning communities use holistic learning strategies that connect body, brain, and emotions. And finally, the games provide memorable moments that students refer back to long after they've left Evergreen.

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Works Cited

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