It Matters *Because* It's a Game: Serious Games and Serious Players

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate how a game, despite the intrinsic artifice involved, can be a context for meaningful and serious literate activity in a way that counters what many students feel is the meaninglessness of schoolwork. We draw on Bernard Suits's ideas about the essential nature of games, and we make a distinction between "serious games"—which emphasize a learning result outside the game—and games in which the play itself deserves to be taken seriously. We use one Web-mediated social simulation, *Place Out Of Time*, as an example, showing how close attention to the activity of the game itself can reveal various kinds of educational value for the participants. By taking the play of the game seriously, we can give students opportunities for learning that are rarely found in traditional schooling. Finally, we use this example to emphasize the importance of taking student work seriously, of inventing the interaction anew each time, and of appreciating student work on its own terms.

Introduction: The Grasshopper

Everyone knows the fable of the grasshopper and the ant: the grasshopper plays all summer while the ant works, and come winter the grasshopper is in trouble. For most kids, this is essentially the same justification they have been given for making an effort at school: work hard now, don't play too much, and you'll be glad later.

To have students study by playing games is therefore subversive. Games are, to most people, diversions. Games do not have long-term consequences, and they are anything but an efficient means of achieving important ends. Their value is in the immediate pleasure of the game, not in some deferred benefit. In contrast, in the education world, the value of an activity is usually assessed in terms of some measurable outcome, not in terms of the intrinsic value of the activity itself. However, the activity itself—and the activity of games in particular—*is* worthy of attention and not just as a means to an end.

In Bernard Suits's (1978) treatise *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, the Grasshopper—yes, the one from the fable—explains what games are and why people play them. He proposes the following definition of a game: "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (p. 41).[1]

A person playing golf, to take just one example, has the goal of getting a ball into a cup some distance away—in itself, a completely unnecessary obstacle in any practical sense. But that is not all: a golf player cannot just walk over and place the ball in the cup; rather, the player must use a particular kind of stick; the ball must be struck, not pushed along; and so on. In ordinary language: games have rules. Rules are unnecessary obstacles that make the game possible. (Suits's definition of *game* goes beyond archetypical games like golf or chess, however. Simulations, dramatic play, and even artistic expression can fall under the "games" category, so long as the activity is "voluntary" and the obstacles "unnecessary.")

"A waste of time! Just get the job done!" we can hear the Ant saying in disgust. And in a sense, the Ant is right. Anyone who focused exclusively on the practical utility of playing golf (or any other game) would stop playing immediately. Playing a game requires the player to suspend, for the duration of the game, the knowledge that what he or she is doing is, in fact, of no practical value; it requires what Suits calls a "lusory attitude": the willing and intentional acceptance of goals and obstacles that are, in a direct practical sense, unnecessary.

Now, the last thing we would want our children to do in school is waste time on unnecessary tasks. But what is the practical value of schoolwork? Usually, what a student does in the classroom has no direct impact on anyone outside that classroom. The obstacles are (in any immediate sense) unnecessary, and yet the student is compelled to overcome them. To adapt Suits's phrase, school itself can be viewed as an *involuntary* attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

"But there *is* value in learning," responds the Ant. "Eventually that learning will be put to practical use." True, perhaps, but the connection usually is tenuous and distant. Schoolwork is necessary so that someday a student can get a good degree, get a good job, be an engaged citizen, have a fulfilling cultural life, and so on. But for most students, those goals are at best terribly far away and at worst unlikely to be achieved. To think that schoolwork matters beyond school requires an act of faith—and perhaps a suspension of disbelief.

And yet we want students to take their schoolwork seriously. We want them to embrace the obstacles we, as teachers, put in front of them. We want to change school from an *involuntary* attempt to overcome (seemingly) unnecessary obstacles to a *voluntary* attempt to overcome those obstacles.[2] We want students to take a lusory attitude toward their schoolwork—we want them to be serious players. Much of our work as educational program designers involves getting students to be serious players of games, and because we are adopting Suits's broad definition of "game," some of this work involves activities, such as simulations and character play, that would not fall under a more narrow definition. In choosing to categorize these activities as "games," we are not trying to establish a "correct" definition of *game* (we learned long ago that we could not control what people felt or said about whether an activity was a game). However, we have found Suits's analyses useful from a learning perspective for the following reason: It makes all the difference in the world if students take their work seriously for reasons that go beyond just getting good grades or because educators say they *should* take things seriously.

Place Out Of Time

In this article we focus on one game, called *Place Out Of Time*, or POOT, in order to demonstrate how examining the game play of serious players can bring to life the more abstract and theoretical considerations of serious game play. POOT is an online simulation of a diplomatic trial,

set in the ancient Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain, a 14th-century architectural masterpiece in which, even if one has not read Washington Irving's classic book, *Tales of the Alhambra*, one imagines all manner of people having interactions of every degree of historical significance. Students play the roles of guests from a range of historic places and times, communicating with other characters in writing and via discussions and private messages on a custom-designed website. Other characters are played by their classmates, by students at other schools (typically about 100 middle and high school students from a total of five to seven schools), and by university students taking a special seminar centered on the POOT program (typically 15–20 in a seminar). The simulation is played over eight weeks, with two weeks at either end for preparation and debriefing. The technology is not fancy: players interact in-character through asynchronous text postings (which take the form of individual messages), focused discussion in the "Great Hall" and "Courtroom," speeches in the "Foyer," "presentations of evidence," and blogs (see figs. 1 and 2.)

The case that is brought to trial is generally a fictional but plausible scenario based on recent real-world events; it is crafted in advance by the program directors in consultation with participating teachers. One recent case involved a young woman in Turkey arrested for creating a website advocating antigovernment activities. Students take on characters ranging from King Henry VIII and Edgar Allen Poe to Madame Curie and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Student participants begin their portrayals by writing a first-person description of their character—a "profile" or "résumé"—which is publicly posted so that all participants in the program can learn about the other "guests" at the Alhambra. We ask the students to "tell everyone something about the kind of person you are, your experiences, your beliefs and your passions," inviting them to convey the voice and personality of their character. A middle school student playing Ptolemy I of Egypt posted the following résumé:

> Greetings! I am Ptolemy I Soter. Now before you get all comfortable with me, let's get one thing straight. If you are not a leader of any kind, you must address me as 'Your Majesty', 'Your Grace', 'Your Highness', or any other thing that expresses my superior rank in hierarchy than you.
>
> Now that that is clear, I can tell you all about myself. But first I have a question. Do any of you like books? If so, please go to my Library of Alexandria. It carries more knowledge than my kingdom does money. I am very proud whenever someone enters it. And how did I get to be king? That is one of my favorite stories to tell . . .

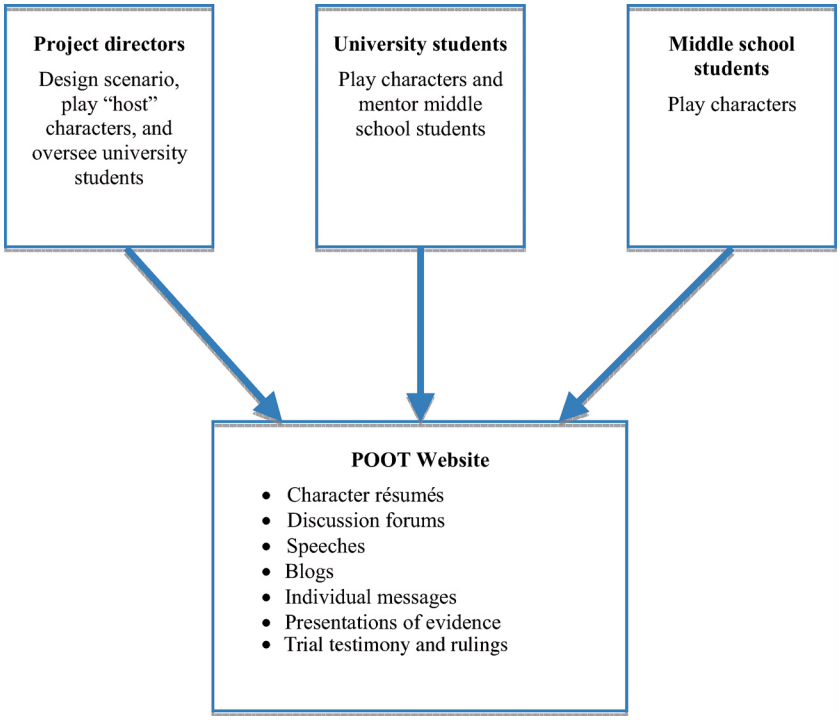

Figure 1 Structure of *Place Out Of Time*.

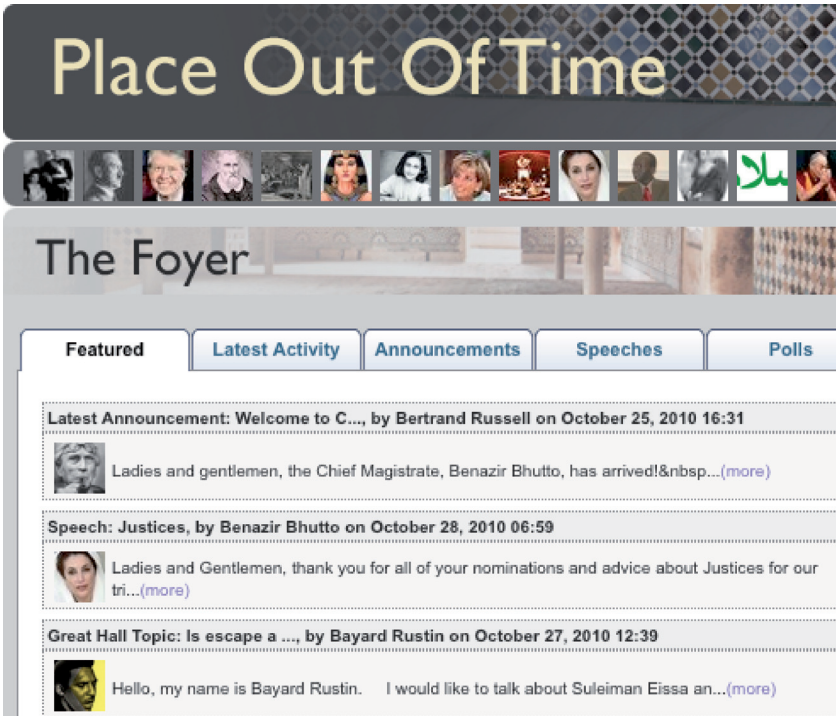

Figure 2 Screenshot of the *Place Out Of Time* website (http://poot.icsmich.org).

The writer, amid the contemporary English colloquialisms, takes pains to inhabit the role, speaking directly to the audience of other "guests" and reminding them of his superior stature as he bluntly cautions them to follow proper protocol when addressing him. The middle school student who "played" Ptolemy within POOT models in this example an orientation to the work that creates clear delineations with his "real self." His unequivocal, provocative statement was likely facilitated by the "cover" provided by character play and the safety of the game environment. The protected world of the game allows players to take risks that would not be feasible if they had to be taken as the player's own self, with all the attendant social baggage and real-world consequences.

The following is the concluding paragraph of the résumé written by Edgar Allen Poe, who was played by another middle school student:

> My favorite pastime is poetry. I began writing when I fell in love at the age of sixteen. As some of you know I have written many works such as The Raven, The Fall of the House of Usher, Tell Tale Heart. My most treasured possession would be my quill. It has kept me going through all the hard times I have lived through. I read poetry which is the one thing I have truly dedicated my life to. I am neither spontaneous nor have a plan. I am simply a man with an unclear future. My greatest strength is the ability to hide behind my words and shield myself from misery, though sometimes this fails utterly. My greatest weakness is the belief that misfortune is just around the corner. My poems are extroverted but I myself am introverted. I am good at expressing pain, receiving pain, and making the people who are important like me. I am bad at being social, not resisting a drink, and holding on to a lover. I believe [I] am dead to life, moody, and non existent when it comes to social life. Other people believe me to be dark and somewhat scary. "Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore'"

Within the course of this paragraph the student who played Poe moves from statements that could be easily generated from basic research about Poe (a declaration of his love for writing, a listing of some of his more famous works) to disarmingly intimate, much more speculative, disclosures. Compared with Ptolemy's colorful self-assertions, Poe strikes a decidedly more melancholy note. He confounds our expectations in a deeper sense because, in contrast with Ptolemy, his inhabiting of his persona is characterized

not by assertions of power but by expressions of self-doubt and human frailty. We find it hard to imagine many situations where anyone, let alone a seventh grader, would feel comfortable writing a statement of such honesty and self-awareness. POOT, though, gave the writer deniability: he was, in the end, not Edgar Allen Poe; the writer himself was not put at risk. Yet he had the opportunity to craft a powerful and—within the confines of POOT—meaningful statement read by many peers. The student who portrayed Edgar Allen Poe had to navigate the intellectual challenge of finding the human essence of someone who was profoundly talented and emotionally complex. Though this was a heady challenge, it was taken on willingly because it mattered. In a practical sense, imagining Edgar Allen Poe's perspective so deeply offered no immediate benefit outside the POOT simulation environment. But within the game, overcoming the unnecessary obstacles of taking on Poe's voice made the serious continuation of the game possible.

(Participation in the simulation *was* required as a school assignment, but the task could have been satisfactorily accomplished without nearly as much intellectual and emotional investment. As the student who played Poe later told us, "I didn't really turn it in for the grade, I turned it in for making other people understand where Poe was coming from, his views [on the trial], and the issues that were being addressed." In his case, at least, the "involuntary obstacles" became voluntary, and the common incentive system of the school—grades—receded in importance.)

After résumés have been posted, we (as the "hosts" of the Alhambra trial) typically offer the characters a series of discussion prompts related to the larger themes of the trial but not tied to the specific details of the trial scenario. The intention is to give players some room to practice being their characters and to experiment with voice. We also want to make the interactive nature of the POOT environment palpable to the players as quickly as possible and to encourage the players to go beyond thinking about their character in isolation to thinking about their character in relation to others and, especially, in reaction to the ideas of others.

In one discussion thread we asked, "Do you think that there are times when violence is justified, or even required? If so, when? Have you personally been in such a situation?" In response to this prompt, Ptolemy replied,

> Of course violence is necessary! What should I do? Sit there like a duck and fall through the hierarchy like a knife through papyrus? No! I claimed kingship like a alpha wolf claims his title: he has to fight for it, and as a reward, he is feared, respected, noticed for being strong, for having the strength to be a leader, the leader of the pack. And as a reward he is first in line for food, first in line for hunting. So I have to be like a wolf: I have to fight for the right to be king.

Despite the linguistic anachronisms, Ptolemy again departs from the niceties of modern-day perspectives on violence, in which social norms and key aspects of what we hold forth as our "better selves" often leave us uncomfortable acknowledging the violent aspects of our nature.

From a historian's perspective this student's portrayal of Ptolemy is far from perfect. From an educational point of view, however, this passage, combined with the student's other work in the game, provides a valuable window into his thinking. The passage is valuable in part because it is authentic expression—fictional, to be sure, but written for the other players and with apparent emotional investment, as opposed to a dry demonstration of knowledge to satisfy a teacher. Nor was this game activity merely "practice" toward some goal outside the game (e.g., acquiring debate skills). The players were serious about the game itself, not just about how they might benefit from having played the game.

Often, events in the simulation become heated topics of debate, sometimes accidentally and sometimes in a more planned way. For example, during the trial of the Turkish woman who had been arrested for her words of protest, we decided midway to introduce seemingly benign intrusions of authority into the online simulation activity. One day, without explanation, postings made by the Turkish woman began to have a "government clearance code" attached to them, and the Chief Magistrate announced that out of politeness and respect, "guests (should) refrain from excessive criticism of any of the governments represented at our . . . gathering." Some of the guests who protested these events found that their speeches mysteriously disappeared from the site, and Poe soon became a leading dissenter (the student playing Poe was egged on by a note, secretly placed in his actual school locker, suggesting that Poe should watch what he was saying). Poe responded to the provocation by announcing the formation of a watchdog committee called the Alhambra Security Committee (ASC):

> The formation of the ASC came when I received a threat in the locker I am using while I stay here. It compelled me to take action and I am going public now because of the recent announcement in the foyer. How can this man hope to give a fair trial if people can't voice what they want to say? I am stepping out and saying here and now that he should be replaced and we should hold an election for the next magistrate. Even if this is not done I request that you join the ASC because we need your help to stop those who are using their power abusively.

Poe and his cohort eventually won the day, and the Chief Magistrate was forced out (though he was allowed to choose his successor, Eleanor of Aquitaine). More important, though, this discord led to a series of impassioned conversations about whether speech should be constrained and what rules (if any) ought to govern respectful discourse. One online discussion thread contained the following posts, among many others (all three were written by middle school students):

Victor Hugo: I think we do not have all of our freedom in the Alhambra . . . . I am not being censored, but Ms. Shiselski [sic] [Kelebek Shishekli, the fictional protagonist of the scenario] is and though I think her view of freedom is far from mine. I still believe that her ability to talk in the Alhambra should be respected in the palace. Now on Nagrila [the Chief Magistrate] I don't know why he didn't surrender his position when the ASC had many participators, but when Gandhi started starving himself, he surrendered immediately. I also question why he picked Lady Eleanor, I for one have never read anything from her no speeches or posts on my account.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Yes. I believe that people have the right to freedom of speech. Everyone should be able to go out and speak their mind and opinion. How is it okay if only certain people get to speak their mind?-It's Not!! I know that I strongly agree with this, but even if everyone has the right to express themselves through what they think, they Do Not have the right to threaten other people or groups. I know that most of you think that that is what Ms. Shishekli did by sending her blog everywhere, but she didn't; it was the terrorist group. And, she didn't actually threaten the government, she spoke her mind, which was the truth, of Turkey taking away the rights of their people just so they could have a better chance of getting into the European Union. To me, I don't think that the European Union should even consider letting Turkey in if that's the way they treat their people.

Richard Nixon: I believe that we should have free speech, but some people just take it too far. For example, what Kelebek did was take something too far. The one thing that she did was threaten the Turkish nation. Yes it is the law so she should have obeyed it. I am sorry for getting off topic but it angers me, being former president of the United States, when someone threatens the nation. So I do think that people deserve to have free speech but don't take it too far.

These conversations continued offline, with middle school students and university students grappling with the same issues. Our conversations about these topics were decidedly more animated by virtue of having, as it were, lived the experience.

Mattering and Not-Mattering

Some might dispute whether POOT should be called a "game"—after all, it does not meet Von Neumann and Morgenstern's (1953) strict definition of a game as an activity having clear move rules and a termination rule (i.e., a rule that specifies who has won at the end of the game). On the other hand, it "feels" like a game, and we might be tempted to go with Wittgenstein's definition, which comes down to the idea that those activities we call "games" have some intuitive similarities, even if we cannot come up with a definitive set of criteria: "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family; build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: 'games' form a family" (Wittgenstein 1989, pt. I, §67). For our purposes, though, Suits's definition—"a voluntary attempt at overcoming unnecessary obstacles"—is more useful, especially because he takes pains to point out that this definition covers role-playing and make-believe games, as well as classical rule-defined games.

Classifying POOT as a game is important for this reason: What happens in a game simultaneously matters a great deal and does not matter at all. In one sense, what the students write in POOT "matters" in a way very different than most schoolwork, because people "out there" are reading and responding (Fox 1988). In another sense, what happens in POOT does not matter at all, because everyone knows that the events in POOT do not affect the real world. This is true in the

same sense that the outcome of the World Cup matters a great deal and at the same time not at all. This dualism allows the players to invest all of their energy and take risks, knowing that in the end the activity is "just a game." Games can accomplish this trick of mattering-yet-not-mattering because they create a separate space where the game occurs (Sousanis 2006), and players are able to move in and out of the game space.

The "mattering-yet-not-mattering" phenomenon can be described another way: When a game ends, the results are *both completely erased and never erased*. The first game of a baseball doubleheader might end with a 10–0 score. The second game begins with the 10-run advantage completely erased even though the 10–0 score goes into the record book *permanently*. The result of a game, though recorded, is not explicitly carried over into the next game—unlike the way a student's cumulative grade point average works. In POOT, this mattering-yet-not-mattering quality allows a student to take on a character who may be reviled or who expresses an unpopular or even morally repugnant stance on an issue, but at the end of the simulation no permanent stigma or sanction is attached to the student.

Suits (1978) points out that this paradoxical way of mattering comes from a fundamental characteristic of games; namely, games reverse the relationship between ends and means. In "real life," goals are the reason to engage in activity, and one tries to choose efficient means to achieve those goals. With games, however, the opposite is true—the goal of a game is important *only* because it makes the game activity possible. The goal is designed so that the activity can take place.

One can put a golf ball into a hole in the ground without using clubs or gather a pile of *Monopoly* money without playing *Monopoly*. Suits calls these "prelusory" goals—states of affairs that can be achieved even without playing the game. But people do not play golf because they love seeing that ball fall into the cup—they love the activity of trying to get the ball into the cup, *following all the rules of golf*. The stuff that "counts" in a game—winning, scoring, making moves, and so on—can be achieved only through playing the game. Likewise, the important thing about POOT is not the verdict of the trial. Rather, the trial allows the character-play to happen; it is the end that makes the means possible.

Serious Games and Serious Players

For most games the end-goal (capturing the most tokens, crossing a finish line first, etc.) is meaningless *except* inside the world of the game. Players need to take the game seriously *while playing the game*, even though they know that the result may be, in the larger world, trivial and arbitrary. In this sense, all games are serious games—players are obliged to take the game seriously, or they are not really playing. (Suits identifies three kinds of nonserious approaches to a game: a "trifler" follows the rules of a game but does not recognize the end-goal; a "cheat" recognizes the goal but does not follow the rules; and a "spoilsport" recognizes neither goal nor rules.)

But when most people use the phrase "serious games," they mean something else—usually, that the game has some serious "ulterior motive." That is, the player has some sort of goal—typically a learning goal—outside the game itself that is supposed to be achieved as a result of playing the game (e.g., Abt 1970; Iuppa and Borst 2006; Kelly et al. 2007). It follows from this perspective that the value of game play must be validated by some form of checking up to see whether what was to have been learned by the play of the game has actually been learned by the time the game is over. The "seriousness" of the game depends, in this perspective, on an external measure.

We suggest a different way of thinking about serious games. If, for a serious player, the goal of the game is important only within the context of the game, then we need to be assessing the play of the game itself, not just the result. Instead of asking, "is the outcome worthwhile?" we should be asking, "is the activity itself worthwhile?" Furthermore, the best evidence of what has been learned might be demonstrated *during* the play of the game.

Among other things, this shift in emphasis can have a profound effect on the relationship between student and teacher. For students, schoolwork often comes down to figuring out *what the teacher wants*. By its very structure, a game like POOT creates a different environment in which the role of the teacher is not eliminated as such but necessarily takes backstage to interaction with mentors and peers (who can, within the simulation activity, include the teachers themselves), all of whom are engaged in the more egalitarian field of play among fellow characters. Thus, when a student playing Edgar Allan Poe is working with his teacher to formulate his response to another character's posting, the task of creating a message that is in-character, that is relevant to the topic, and that potentially will provoke further responses—that is, the task of playing within the rules the game—supplants

or at least diminishes the more familiar student-producing-for-teacher relationship. This vividly illustrates what another POOT teacher called the students' efforts to "live up to the standards" of their character. What often unfolds is the potentially powerful combination of effort to make the character real and recognizably human and desire to honor and do justice to the biographical reality of the character's life and achievements. Many of the students participating in POOT view the business of representing their characters as a serious matter. They know that others are attending to their words, and this knowledge is a powerful animating force for the simulation.

Intellectual Activity

If we shift our focus from the outcome to the activity, then we ought to ask, "From an educational perspective, does the activity in the game reflect the kind of intellectual activity we want students to engage in?"

In general, POOT players are engaged in activity with substantial educational and intellectual potential. The POOT simulation exemplifies and elucidates the intrinsic *sociability* of learning (Vygotsky 1978), and it furnishes an arena in which students can, in a distinctively interactive and interpersonal fashion, examine, question, interrogate, challenge, and refine—intellectual activity that typically takes place within the individual consciousness of the scholar. POOT can thus be characterized as an inherently dialogical learning project because through play and *inter*play the student comes to own and (in the lusory sense of the term) deploy his or her character. This interanimation of voices resonates with what has been explored in a more theoretical register in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In one of the more oft-cited passages from *The Dialogical Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) argues that within the genre of the novel,

> The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace of its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence the entire stylistic profile. (p. 276)

The language Bakhtin uses here in discussing issues of textual interpretation is, for our purposes, felicitously descriptive. At its best, POOT is precisely "a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment"—something that our university students work hard at effecting—and the "weaving in and out of complex relationships" lies at the heart of the experience any POOT simulation aims to create. A recurrent theme in POOT is the notion of provocation: in the scenarios we devise, in the characters we select, and in the kinds of exchanges we foster, one of our prime tasks as instructors and mentors is "to keep it interesting" by making each POOT simulation as interactive and provocative as possible.

If we want to know whether participants in POOT are learning something worthwhile about, say, history, we can examine their activity in the game and compare it to the kinds of intellectual activity we know are important in doing historical inquiry.[3] On this measure, too, POOT does well. POOT asks a player to continually "get inside the head" of a historical figure, and, as Bain and Mirel (1982) suggest, asking "What were they thinking?" is an excellent place to begin any history lesson. Holt (1995) notes that while historians do not have the freedom novelists have in inventing a person's inner life, "they do presume . . . to 'talk about how they think,' their motivations and purposes, much of which must be inferred rather than accessed directly" (p. 15). Another historian has described his work in ways that sound strikingly like what players do in POOT:

> [W]hen evaluating ideas for the problems they illuminate, we can use one author to interrogate another so that ideas speak to our condition as well as theirs. Various thinkers in this study will be treated as though they were in a conversation with one another, with [Henry] Adams looking over their shoulders as they compose their thoughts on texts that the author has critically examined. (Diggins 1994, p. 7)

Historical inquiry is not just a matter of transporting oneself in an imaginary time machine to a different place and era; it is crucial to imagine what being a person in that place and time was like—what they thought and what they knew. But how can we reasonably ask our students to put aside everything they know is true and right and imagine what the world looks like with a different set of information and values? How can we ask our students to be what they are not? When Wineburg (2001) calls the study of history an "unnatural act," he is talking about this paradox.

And history is not the only discipline to asks learners to put aside "common sense": mathematics, science, and art, to name just a few, all have distinct, nonintuitive ways of looking at the world, ways that are essential for a real understanding of the discipline. If we see things only in terms of our own "common sense," learning never becomes anything more than the acquisition of facts and algorithms.

POOT asks players to put aside common sense and think differently. At the same time, we cannot expect POOT players to think just like professional historians. Giving a seventh grader with a shaky grasp of world history the task of imagining what, for example, Ptolemy would say to Edgar Allen Poe is, on the face of it, absurd. The idea that other kids, much less adults, should take seriously this seventh grader's ideas on the topic is even more absurd. Yet, what we ask of students in a traditional history or global studies course is equally problematic. We want them to understand something important about the discipline of history and to "think like a historian," knowing full well that right now there is no chance they will be able to do the kind of work that a professional historian would take seriously.[4]

This may be the most important reason for games to be part of school. Games provide students the opportunity to break with common sense and yet be taken seriously in the context of the game, even though everyone knows that outside the game what they are doing might be absurd. Games provide us an opportunity to take our students' explorations seriously, without being judgmental or condescending. They provide safe bubbles where students (and teachers) can take risks and try out different ways of thinking, inviting others to attend to their actions while preserving a distinction between their own self and the role they have taken on.

These actions are worthy of our attention because they will show whether players have been able to take the leap to a different way of thinking. If our job is to facilitate, then it is not so much to help the players understand where they have arrived as to help them understand where they have been.

Conclusion: Taking Play Seriously

"Teaching is mostly listening and learning is mostly telling" (Meier 1995, p. xiii). We should be listening seriously to the game activity itself and devising games where the activity is worth listening to seriously.

This may seem radical, and in some ways it is, but early childhood educators have been saying something like it for years. In *A Child's Work*, Paley (2004) writes that in her early days as a teacher she recognized the extrinsic value of play—"I could see that the children's play promoted a long list of social, emotional, verbal, and physical skills that could be reported in a fairly straightforward manner" (p. 16)—but she gave little serious attention to the content of the play itself, the ideas that consumed the children as they played. Her eventual realization that the narratives of children's fantasy play are themselves worthy of attention changed her entire approach to teaching.[5] Here is one conversation Paley recorded between two of her kindergarteners, followed by her assessment:

> "Peter Rabbit is a robber, you know," says five-year-old William, as Theresa, age four, pours two cups of tea. "But I don't think I drink tea if I'm a robber."
>
> Theresa pushes a cup closer to William. "You could have it because it's chamillia-willia tea. That means it's for you because you're a *William*."
>
> "But I'm a robber. They don't drink tea."
>
> "Peter is not a robber. Oh, no."
>
> "He steals the lettuce, so he *is* a robber."
>
> "Mr. McGregor is mean. So it's okay for Peter to do that. And I'm your mother. You can't be a robber if I'm waiting for you."
>
> This has been a conversation of great merit. The logic is clear: robbers do not have mothers who wait for them and give them tea. As to whether or not it is acceptable to steal from a mean person, the issue will arise again now that the idea has been introduced, stimulating new conversations. "William was wondering before if Peter Rabbit is a robber and if robbers drink tea," I might say during snack time. "And Theresa, you seemed to think Peter isn't really a robber, didn't you?" (p. 58)

Here, the game—the children's dramatic play—is not just a means to a desirable end (like learning social patterns or developing language skills); it is the *center* of the intellectual life of Paley's classroom. The distinction is akin to the difference between wanting your kid to play soccer solely because of the health benefits,

versus becoming a fan and follower of the team; it is the difference between taking the benefits of the game seriously and taking the game play itself seriously.

In our zeal to convey important information or ideas, we naturally focus on the benefits. Too often, though, this leads to boring games—or activities that are not really games at all but dressed-up lectures or drills. These may adequately transmit a concept, but they miss the deeper magic of game play: not just the feeling of immersion and fun but the singular experience of being taken seriously.

Notes

1. We make a further distinction between games and puzzles. Both are "voluntary attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles," but a puzzle has a winning (or best) outcome that is determined in advance, while the outcome of a game cannot be determined in advance. Accordingly, games tend to have good replay value; puzzles do not.
2. An "*involuntary* attempt to overcome *unnecessary* obstacles" is what we would call, in ordinary language, a *punishment*. To push the variations even further, an "*involuntary* attempt to overcome *necessary* obstacles" is a *duty* or *obligation*, and a "*voluntary* attempt to overcome *necessary* obstacles" is *activism* or *entrepreneurship*. Many students experience school as a punishment. For some, school is experienced as a duty—an obligation to one's parents or even to oneself. At times, school can be genuinely engaging when experienced as a puzzle (i.e., a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles, where the best outcome is determined in advance). Seldom, though, is school experienced as a game or as activism. Turning school into a setting for activism is a worthwhile goal in itself, but one that we will not address in this article.
3. Because POOT has been used in a range of subject areas—including history, global studies, and literature—no one set of criteria can be applied to assess definitively whether it is an educational success or failure.
4. Holt (1995) makes a complementary argument when he proposes that young people can learn to do serious historical inquiry even without the background knowledge of a professional historian: "One does not have to wait for some moment when they have 'enough' background, because whatever their background there will always be unanswered questions and gaps in their knowledge. Indeed, this is one of the things they should learn about the process and its necessary discipline. Part of the historian's skill is to recognize where the gaps are; part of the creativity is working through the gaps" (p. 15).
5. Whether "play," as defined by Paley and other early childhood educators, falls completely under our definition of a "game" is a legitimate question. Suits (1978) takes pains to include make-believe dramatic play in his definition, arguing that such activities are games with a cooperative goal of keeping the action going, with "moves" being an ongoing series of dramatic evocations and responses. Paley's work focuses on this kind of dramatic play, and so—regardless of whether Suits's definition can be stretched to encompass all the other things we call "play"—we do find Paley's ideas relevant here.

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