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Why Gaming, Why Alternative Futures?

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Marxists always start out by quoting Marx. Critical theorists bow to Foucault. Marshall McLuhan, the patron saint of all futurists said, "anyone who makes a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either" (Prensky, 2002, p. 8). I agree.

I first became seriously interested in pedagogical games when I read an essay by Thomas Schelling titled "Experimental Games and Bargaining Theory" (Schelling, 1961). He described a game he had constructed to show that secrecy and lack of transparency contributed to international conflicts.

I was in Tokyo, Japan, at the time, teaching in the College of Law and Politics of Rikkyo University. I decided to adapt the game, and invited some of my colleagues from the College to come to my home one weekend to play it. All of my fellow faculty colleagues were total peaceniks—active in peace movements in Japan at the time, and active in peace research and teaching as well.

And yet the premise of Schelling's game was spectacularly demonstrated. "Secrecy and lack transparency" indeed did contribute to conflict. In fact, I had to call the game off after a few hours because everyone was attacking everyone else with great gusto and enthusiasm because of the mutual uncertainty and suspicion provoked by secret negotiations, behind closed doors, by each team. My Japanese colleagues were shocked when they realized that a simple game could provoke such distrust and hostility against their own comrades!

I never played any more games in Japan.

But I did read a book titled, *Fights, Games, and Debates,* by Anatol Rapoport (1960). Rapoport discussed the psychological and political implications of those three modes of competitive engagement, showing among other things how easily one might segue into the other—not only that debates and games can easily become fights, but also that fights sometimes can de-escalate into debates, and even into games.

When I returned to the United States after six years at Rikkyo, I renewed my interest in gaming again while teaching in the Department of Political Science of Virginia Tech, in the remote mountains of Blacksburg, Virginia. Initially, my focus was on a simple game called "The Tower Building Exercise".

The apparent purpose of the exercise is for teams to build a tower out of material provided. The towers are judged on the basis of their height, strength, and beauty, as determined by neutral judges. One tower is declared the winner.

Each team is given a plastic bag of "tower building materials." The materials are very inadequate to the task: just enough to build a small fragile tower. Each team has a different mix of building material.

Each bag also has one token which the team can use as money.

There is a store with many big clear plastic bags that are chock full of wonderful and varied building materials--each bag in the store is much, much better than that of any single team. If each team were to buy one bag from the store, they certainly will be able build a much better tower than if they were to use only the material provided them. There are enough bags for sale for each team to buy one, if they choose. Each bag of material at the store costs one token.

Any team can freely pool its resources with other teams to build a joint tower if they choose to do so.

However, the store also sells guns.

There are only a few guns--not enough for every team to have one. And each gun costs two tokens. Since each team has only one token, it is necessary for at least two teams to join together in order to buy a gun and use it.

Each gun has two bullets, and cannot be refilled or reused after it is "fired".

With a gun, teams can either keep them to prevent other teams from buying guns, or attack other teams. They cannot use a gun to protect themselves. Any team under attack must dismantle its tower entirely and give half of its building material to the attacking team. Then the attacked team should start building another tower with the remaining materials. A neutral referee presides over each attack, dismantlement, and distribution of materials.

Games normally last at least one hour. But they may last longer.

There are no rules about how the teams are organized internally, such as how it is decided whether to build with what they are given, or to spend the token on more materials, or to try to convince some other team to join with them in an attack.

It is permissible for all teams to join together into one big happy team, pooling their materials to build one magnificent tower. Or some can join while others stay separate, or....

A very important part of the game, for which ample time must be allotted beforehand, is debriefing.

Indeed the point of the game is not actually to build a winning tower at all. The point is to discuss afterwards how each group made the decisions it did, especially whether to attack other teams or not.

One memorable game was at Hollins College, an all-women's college in a town nearby. The occasion was a large meeting of peace researchers and students. It was during the depths of the Vietnam War, and one of the most influential anti-war advocates on the Virginia Tech campus was the Episcopal priest who ran the local Canterbury Club (for students affiliated with the Episcopal Church).

The game at Hollins was played in a large gymnasium. The building materials for sale at the store were spread out on tables along one side. The room was spacious and large, so most teams took the bag of scanty materials given them, and found some spot in the gymnasium to sit down, examine the material, and decide what to do.

In almost all cases, the women in each group immediately began building a tower out of what was at hand, while some of the men went to go buy more material from the store. Other men chose to roam the room, spying on what the other teams were doing. They sometimes brought that information back to their groups to decide what to do next. Other times, the men decided among themselves without consulting the rest of their team.

However, one team took their material inside one of the few rooms in the hallway outside of the gymnasium, and closed the door.

As long as each team could see and hear what the other teams were doing and deciding, calm prevailed. But when it was discovered that one team was operating in secret, it immediately raised the ire of some of the men in the other teams. They began talking among themselves, leaving it to the women and the rest of the men to build the towers while they conspired to attack the sequestered team. Eventually, men from several of the teams joined together, took their team's tokens, bought guns and ammunition from the store, and attacked the hidden team, destroying its tower with great enthusiasm and loud acclaim—only to discover that the team behind the door had no plans to attack at all, but had been peacefully building its own tower to the best of its ability.

The leader of the attacking group was the pacifist Episcopal priest.

He was totally shocked and chastened when he came to realize what he had done. It humbled him for a long time, and his opposition to the Vietnam war became quite muted from that time on.

After coming to Hawaii, I used the tower building exercise in my classes for a while, and most

memorably with several groups of diplomats from the Federated States of Micronesia. Not only did no team from the FSM ever attack another, but also it was almost impossible to keep them from building one big beautiful tower together!

However, I became even more directly involved with educational games during my last summer at Virginia Tech when I directed a six-week civics institute for high school teachers and administrators in economically disadvantaged areas, on a grant from the US Office of Education. The purpose of the institute was to enable and encourage high school teachers of government classes to teach the subject by games as much as possible, and to minimize lectures and textbooks. The participants produced impressive games for their government classes.

When I came to the University of Hawaii in September 1969 to teach futures studies, I became involved in the state-wide "Hawaii 2000" activities already underway (Chaplin & Paige, 1973). I primarily focused on using spectacular audio-visual communication techniques both to get the futures messages out to the public and to get the ideas of ordinary people into the process. I was greatly influenced by the work of Robert Jungk, a futurist from Austria, who pioneered the use of futures-creation workshops throughout Europe, and began featuring that method in my own work, with several significant modifications (Dator, 1993).

As many of you know, I concluded long ago that it is not possible to predict the future, if by prediction you mean to describe accurately what will happen 10, 20, perhaps 50 years into the futures. What is possible, and should be among the main work of futurists, is to forecast (not predict) alternative futures (not THE future), and on the basis of a careful consideration of the alternative futures, then to envision and create policies and plans that move organizations and communities towards preferred futures, on a continuing basis of scanning, experiencing, envisioning, creating, scanning, experiencing.., ever onward.

Years ago, trying to make sense of the myriad of images of the futures that exist in the world, I concluded that they each were specific examples of one (or a combination) of four generic images of the futures that can be labeled simply, Grow, Collapse/New Beginnings, Discipline, and Transform (Dator, 2009).

At the "Manoa School" we normally work with clients in a highly participative way: our goal is to make them futurists so that they have the ability and will routinely to do the scanning, experiencing, envisioning, creating, and scanning themselves.

We had learned that we should never ask people to decide on a preferred future until they have actively experienced at least two, and preferably all four, manifestations of the four generic futures.

Even though almost no one has ever had any formal education in futures studies, all humans are able to tell you what they think the future will be, or should be, or should not be on the basis of powerful fictional images they have read or seen or played, on the one hand, and on the basis of whatever is worrying them now, on the other hand. If things are going well, the future will be OK also; if things are going poorly, only bad futures lie ahead. However, if something happens tonight to change their feelings about the present, their images of the future also immediately change— overnight (I spoke these words, in Taiwan, the day that Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, which illustrated my point far too well).

But for most people, you ask them now about the future, and they will immediately respond with an episode from a movie they saw. People have memories of the future at least as powerful (and often as misleading) as their memories of the past, unfortunately.

So, something needs to be done to get people out of what I call their "crackpot" images of the futures, and that is where experiencing the four generic futures come in.

The four generic futures of the Manoa School are interactive experiences based on the principles of games, which in turn are based on the fact that the best way to learn is to do actively, while the worst way to learn is to read or listen passively—like you are doing now. Games are the closest we can come to actually doing politics repeatedly, and to pre-experiencing alternative futures so as to

have a wider understanding of what might be viable preferred futures. That is to say, games are to the social sciences what laboratory experiments are to the natural sciences. Therefore, among the best ways the best ways to do social science research is through the experience and analysis of repeated games.

But like anything else, games have their drawbacks. They are difficult to construct fairly and accurately; they take time to play and analyze; and most of all they are too powerful—as I have already suggested, participants in games often develop unhealthy attachments to the role they played in the game, or to the reason one game turned out the way it did, rather than understanding the overall results of repeated games.

Moreover, in our fiction-saturated media-driven society, unless games are rigorously based on the best possible theories, methods and data available, they can be just one more factor making it difficult if not impossible for most people to separate fantasy from what some people call facts—the elections of Ronald Reagan, a B-grade movie actor who seemed to believe he actually fought in the War because of the roles he played in his old war movies; George W. Bush, a dangerous dissembler who imagined the Mission was Accomplished because he assumed the stance of "Commander-in –Chief" on the deck of a mammoth aircraft carrier and vaingloriously proclaimed the Mission to be Accomplished; and Donald Trump, a narcissistic "reality show" misogynist who confidentially proclaims as truth what he had confidentially proclaimed as false only moments before, much to the delight of his enthralled voting audience are all prime examples of this confusion of fact and fiction within the American political context.

Speaking of fact and fiction, I mentioned Thomas Schelling as being a source of my interest in games. Many of you know that he was one of the founders of what is known as Game Theory and was awarded a Nobel Prize in 2005 for his work. Unlike gaming as I have been discussing it—a way of capturing and experiencing the complexity and diversity of social interactions—game theory is just the opposite: it is a tool that some economists, "rational-choice" political theorists, and others use to model and test certain narrow ideals about rational decision-making by humans. Probably the best-known example is the "Prisoners' Dilemma" in which participants play suspects, kept in separate cells, rationally deciding independently of each other whether to confess or deny their role in a criminal act, in part by deciding what the other prisoner will decide, and in part by evaluating the relative loss and gains from various decision options. As a logical, abstract, mathematical model of human behavior, the Prisoners' Dilemma has proven of utility in several applications.

As an example of actual human decision-making in such circumstances, it is not only a failure but, like free-market capitalist theory in general, a profoundly misleading tragedy, I believe.

Which leads to my final point.

Many futurists have adopted the convention that after *homosapiens*, *sapiens* emerged during the Holocene Epoch following the last ice age, we have been driven as a species by our genes, environments, cultures, technologies, decisions, and chance to move from small, peaceful, abundant, face-to-face hunting and gathering societies, to large, vengeful, hierarchical, bureaucratic agricultural societies, called "civilization", to international, competitive, exploitative, wasteful industrial societies, to—only 75 or so years ago—information societies where the production and consumption of written words are our primary concern.

Some futurists have argued that a possible next transition is from information to dreams. Indeed, Dr. Seo Yongseok and myself have been among those who have suggested that South Korea, with its explicit recognition of the economic and political utility of popular culture, including electronic games, might be an example of a society in transition to a Dream Society now (Dator & Seo, 2005).

A Dream Society might also be a society exemplified by games, in contrast to the killing wars of agricultural and industrial societies, and the endless debates of information societies, as Anatol Rapoport makes that distinction. The essence of games is learning to excel while playing by arbitrary rules. You want to win, but you want to win fairly. Beating weak teams is not really

satisfying. Beating teams equal to you is satisfying, while beating better teams is thrilling, and may indicate that you are becoming better and better at gaining status and identity engaging fully in something that, when all is said and done, really doesn't matter except within the context of the game, which is all that really matters.

A society in which everyone competes fully but fairly in meaningless games sounds pretty much like heaven to me.

To quote our patron saint again, Marshall McLuhan once asked us to imagine what the world would be like if television had been invented before the printing press (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Steven Johnson, a strong proponent of the positive value of popular culture products, and especially of electronic games, took McLuhan's counterfactual one step farther.

In his book (yes, book), *Everything Bad is Good for You,* Steven Johnson asks the reader to imagine what we would say about writing if video games had evolved before writing, and if kids had "been playing games for centuries--and then these page-bound texts come along and suddenly they're all the rage"? He suggests that the new "frenzy of reading" would be greeted by critics like this:

> *"Reading books chronically understimulates the senses. Unlike the longstanding tradition of gameplaying--which engages the child in a vivid, three-dimensional world filled with moving images and musical soundscapes, navigated and controlled with complex muscular movements--books are simply a barren string of words on the page. Only a small portion of the brain devoted to processing written language is activated during reading, while games engage the full range of the sensory and motor cortices.*
> *"Books are also tragically isolating. While games have for many years engaged the young in complex social relationships with their peers, building and exploring words together, books force the child to sequester him or herself in a quiet space, shut off from interaction with other children. These new 'libraries' that have arisen in recent years to facilitate reading activities are a frightening sight: dozens of young children, normally so vivacious and socially interactive, sitting alone in cubicles, reading silently, oblivious to their peers.*
> *"Many children enjoy reading books, of course, and no doubt some of the flights of fancy conveyed by reading have their escapist merits. But for a sizable percentage of the population, books are downright discriminatory. The reading craze of recent years cruelly taunts the 10 million Americans who suffer from dyslexia--a condition that didn't even exist as a condition until printed text came along to stigmatize its suffers.*
> *"Perhaps the most dangerous property of these books is the fact that they follow a fixed linear path. You can't control their narratives in any fashion--you simply sit back and have the story dictated to you. For those of us raised on interactive narratives, this property may seem astonishing. Why would anyone want to embark on an adventure utterly choreographed by another person? But today's generation embarks on such adventures millions of times a day. This risks instilling a general passivity in our children, making them feel as though they're powerless to change their circumstances. Reading is not an active participatory process: it's a submissive one. The book readers of the younger generation are learning to 'follow the plot' instead of learning to lead." (Johnson, 2005, p. 19-20)*

John Sweeney, Aubrey Yee, and myself took Johnson at his word, and so Chapter 6, titled "Gaming Futures", of our book, *Mutative Media (*2014), is devoted to a discussion of games and the construction, playing, and results of a hybrid game (for which Aaron Rosa and Sweeney were

primarily responsible) that exemplified Marshall McLuhan's best known dictum: "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us"—which turns out actually not to be a quote from McLuhan, but from his colleague, John Culkin (who may have gotten it from McLuhan).[1]

So I end where I began, once again quoting Marshall McLuhan as saying, "anyone who makes a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either" (Prensky, p. 8).

Or as the Emperor Caligula might have said, "Let the games begin"!

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Endnotes

1. https:mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/we-shape-our-tools-and-thereafter-our-tools-shape-us/. However, McLuhan and Culkin might have adapted it from a statement by Winston Churchill [Hansard, House of Commons, Deb 28 October 1943 vol 393 cc403: the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us". This was then quoted by Godfrey Nicholson, p. 436, and by Captain De Chair on p. 462, on deliberating the upgrading of the House of Lords].

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