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Games, School and the Benefits of Inefficiency

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Abstract: Students are highly skilled at finding the most efficient way to attain school-imposed goals, such as passing a test, completing an assignment, or getting the correct answer to a question. The problem is, the most efficient way often allows the student to circumvent thought and activity that could lead to learning. We want students not just to strive toward task completion goals, but to approach tasks in ways that may be less efficient, but more conducive to learning. Furthermore, we want students not to simply tolerate these inefficiencies, but to embrace them. Games require what Bernard Suits has called a "lusory attitude" - game players intentionally and willingly accept rules that compel them to use less efficient means to achieving an end. We suggest that without a lusory attitude toward school, students may become efficient students, but not good learners. We do not propose turning all schoolwork into games; rather, we argue that school activities can be designed in ways that promote a lusory attitude among students. This paper discusses this idea in the context of the Place Out Of Time project, a web-mediated character-playing simulation that engages students with social, historical, and cultural issues over a period of two months. Through examples, narratives, and reflections by participating teachers and students, we explore the experiences of middle school students and teachers who participated in the project. We pay particular attention to instances where students seem to have taken a lusory attitude toward their work, and we discuss those instances particularly in terms of engagement with content and the thoughtful employment of creative imagination.

Keywords: Games, Simulation, Character Playing, Web-based Learning, Social Studies, Middle School, K-12/University Collaboration, Pedagogy

Introduction: The Grasshopper

IT BEGAN, APPROPRIATELY enough, with a grasshopper.

"It happened because a grasshopper actually jumped in my window," Sherry told us later. "It was the beginning of the year, and we had a grasshopper. And I asked everyone, 'is the grasshopper big or small?' And everyone said, 'Small, it's small.' And I threw the grasshopper out the window. And I said, 'Ok, grasshoppers are small, but what if you're an ant? And they said, 'Oh, it's giant.'"

Sherry's seventh grade social studies students, like most students everywhere, were quick to come up with the "right" answer to the question, "are grasshoppers big or small?" -- obviously, they are small. But Sherry swiftly changed the question from "what is the answer" to "whose view are you taking?" And in that instant, the game began.

Everyone knows the fable about 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, it is essentially the same justification they have been told for spending effort at school: work hard now, don't play too much, and you'll be glad later.

Which makes it all the more subversive to have students study by playing games. Games are, in most people's minds, diversions. They don't have long-term consequences, and they are anything but efficient means of achieving important ends. Their value is in the immediate pleasure of the game, not in some deferred benefit. We would like to argue, however, that the best learners are often grasshoppers, not ants. Let us explain:

In Bernard Suits's (1978) treatise *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, the Grasshopper -- yes, the one from the fable -- spends the book trying to explain, in essence, what games are and why people play them. In this work he proposes the following definition of a game: *Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles* (p. 41).

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's not all: a golf player can't just walk over and place the ball in the cup; rather, she must use a particular kind of stick; the ball must be struck, not pushed along; and so on. To say it in ordinary language, games have rules. Rules are unnecessary obstacles that make the game possible.



“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 she is doing is, in fact, of no practical value. It requires what Suits has called a “lusory attitude”: the willing and intentional acceptance of goals and obstacles that are, in a direct practical sense, unnecessary.

Back in Sherry’s classroom, the grasshopper has been put out the window. The distraction is over; the children can get back to work. Certainly, the last thing we would want our children to do in school is waste time. But wait -- when we think about it, what is the practical value of schoolwork? Usually, what a student does in the classroom has no direct impact on anyone outside that classroom. To borrow 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 it is usually a tenuous and distant connection at best. 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 terribly far away, and at worst unlikely to be achieved. It requires an act of faith -- perhaps a suspension of disbelief -- to think that schoolwork matters beyond school.

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 unnecessary obstacles” to a “*voluntary* attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” In other words, we want them to take a lusory attitude toward their schoolwork.

There is another approach, which is to make the unnecessary obstacles into necessary obstacles -- to change school tasks so that they actually have an impact on the outside world. In the right situation, this can work beautifully, and it is the fundamental idea behind service learning. But taking this approach is not always possible. In this paper we explore the first approach, in other words, trying to get students to take on a lusory attitude in school. Or, more simply put, an approach to make school more like a game.

For Sherry and her colleague Wynn, who both teach at the same urban middle school, their approach

included bringing their students into what might be called a large educational game, a program called Place Out Of Time, or POOT.

Place out of Time: A Social Space for Creative Imaginings

POOT is an online simulation of a diplomatic trial, set in the ancient Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain. Students play roles as guests from a range of historic places and times, communicating with other characters in writing, via discussions and private messages on a custom-designed website. Other characters are played not only by their classmates, but also by students at other schools, and by university students taking a special seminar centered on the POOT program.

In the fall of 2005, the trial revolved around a fictional (though plausible) case of a young woman in Turkey arrested for posting a website advocating anti-government activities. Sherry and Wynn’s students took on characters ranging from King Henry VIII and Edgar Allen Poe to Madame Curie and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our experience watching POOT unfold over the years has convinced us that many kids grasp the game-like nature of the program right away, and they intuitively take a lusory attitude toward their participation.¹ In these cases, the students simply need permission to play in order to get rolling. We illustrate what we have in mind with some examples of student-created work below. To help put what you are about to read in context, you should know that the student participants begin their portrayals with a written, first-person description of their character, called a resume, which is posted publicly so that all participants in the program can learn about their fellow guests. In engaging with this task, we ask the students to “tell everyone something about the kind of person you are, your experiences, your beliefs and your passions,” inviting the students not only to inform others of their accomplishments, but to also convey a feel for the kind of person they are.

Here’s the resume of the middle school student who took on the task of representing Ptolemy I of Egypt:

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.

¹ Anecdotal evidence from POOT and other character-playing programs suggests that the most enthusiastic participants also are enthusiastic players of entertainment-oriented role-playing games, including online multiplayer games. Through their own attitudes and actions, these players can pave the way for participants who have less experience with role-playing or character-playing, and in this way they can help others take on a lusory attitude toward their work.

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...

One of the initial challenges faced by POOT participants is that of approaching the matter of biographical writing in a different way. A central aspect of engaging with this challenge has to do with establishing a distinctive voice, and taking a kind of imaginative stance. The student portraying Ptolemy attends to this from the outset, reminding the assemblage of his superior stature as he bluntly cautions his fellow guests to follow proper protocol when addressing him. The middle school student who “plays” Ptolemy within POOT models an orientation to the work that creates clear delineations with his “2005 self,” making an unequivocal and provocative statement that is likely facilitated by the “cover” provided by character play and the safety of the game environment. In other words, the protected world of the game allows players to take risks that would not be feasible if they had to be done as the player’s own self, with all the attendant social baggage and real-world consequences. Note, too, the deft stylistic strategy of inviting his readers to learn more about him with the “do you like books?” query, as well as the rhetorical question about how he became King. Ptolemy is a storyteller, demonstrating a thoughtful awareness of his audience.²

At the outset of the POOT simulation, 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 our trial scenario. We do this, primarily, to give our students some room to practice being their character, and to experiment with voice. We also want to make the interactive nature of the POOT environment palpable to the students as quickly as possible. Our goal is for each student to go beyond thinking about their character in isolation and to be thinking about their character in relation to others, and, especially, in reaction to the ideas of others. We hope to engender an inquisitive mindset in which the question of “who is this person saying these things to me?” will lead the students to investigate the stories of other guests. As an example of how this can play out in the simulation, in one

discussion thread, we as the hosts 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, Dante sent a private message to Ptolemy asking where Ptolemy stands on the question, and here is how Ptolemy replied:

Dante the writer,

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. Ptolemy

As with his resume, Ptolemy takes advantage of the protected game-space, lustily chiding Dante for posing a question to which the answer is painfully obvious. To answer otherwise, Ptolemy suggests, would be to expose oneself as being naïve, or worse. Ptolemy makes an analogy between his situation and that of the alpha wolf, needing to fiercely defend his position as leader. Once again, Ptolemy departs clearly 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” would leave us uncomfortable acknowledging the violent aspects of our nature. Finally, the embrace of “let’s pretend” allows for an action space, where the canny use of words *is* action, thus lending great currency to the writing, as well as the imagining, that the students do.

To provide another example of how the POOT environment provides opportunities for students to voluntarily take on “unnecessary” challenges, here’s the concluding paragraph of the resume written by Edgar Allen Poe, played by a seventh grader:

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

² While “voice” (which includes a strong awareness of the writer’s audience and purpose) is widely recognized as a crucial writing trait (Culham, 2003), it is notoriously difficult to foster in young writers, who may not yet have a strong sense of their own individuality and place in the world. POOT allows writers to sidestep this problem by taking on the voice of someone who has a known (or at least discoverable) persona. The student who played Edgar Allan Poe told us, “It was a lot easier [to write] when I was Poe, I knew what he would say, when sometimes with me, I don’t know because it’s a new thing.” Paradoxically, writing as someone else can allow students to write with a greater sense of self than if they were writing in their own voice.

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 my self 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 we move from statements we might expect (a declaration of his love for writing, a listing of some of his more famous works) to disarmingly intimate disclosures. Viewed in light of Ptolemy’s colorful self-assertions, Poe strikes a decidedly more melancholy note. He confounds our expectations in a deeper sense as, in contrast with Ptolemy, his inhabiting of his persona is characterized not by assertions of power, but in expressions of self-doubt and human frailty. It is hard to imagine many situations where anyone, much less a seventh grader, would feel comfortable writing a statement of such honesty and self-awareness. POOT, though, gives the writer deniability: he is, in the end, not Edgar Allen Poe; the writer himself has not been put at risk. Yet he has 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 clearly one taken on willingly, because it mattered. As the student 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.

The Importance of Responses

We have seen in the examples above how, when embraced, the “unnecessary obstacle” of portraying a character allows students a social space for creative imaginings in written form, a space where they could assert themselves in ways that would have been impossible without the shared constraint of the game. In other words, for many of the students, it worked:

participation in POOT became, to a greater or lesser extent, a voluntary activity. To be sure, it was required work, and they were being graded, but the work wasn’t “just for the grade.” In Sherry’s words:

I don’t have to fight any of them to write something to be posted. Kids don’t necessarily like to write, but they all like to talk, every single one. So if you can get them in character... once it starts, the talking does it for them. Once they speak from their character’s voice, then they [think], ‘I want to speak, but I can’t speak on the website, I have to write it down.’

Why do kids like to talk? What makes writing in POOT more engaging (at least at times) than other writing tasks in school? One key, we believe, is the potential for getting a response -- in particular, a response from someone other than the teacher, in a form that is not simply a grade or evaluation. The educator and children’s author Mem Fox has argued that the expectation of a response -- especially a “real” response from someone the writer cares about -- is crucial to a writer’s motivation, and by extension, to a writer’s development (Fox, 1988):

Whenever I write, whether it’s a picture book, or my journal, or a course handbook for students, or notes for the milkman, there’s always someone on the other side, if you like, who sits invisibly watching me write, waiting to read what I’ve written. The watcher is always important. I’ve discovered I never write for people of no importance. (p. 116)

In Mem Fox’s experience, the response of a teacher to a fabricated assignment is not real enough to make students care about writing: she speaks of the difference -- in quality as well as enthusiasm -- between letters her pre-service teacher students wrote to “parents of a class of imaginary children” and a letter some of those same students wrote in reply to an opinion by a cranky education critic published in the local newspaper. The students spent “hours drafting and arguing” about the wording of the letter for the newspaper, and were rewarded with a big headline and attention from talk radio. Fox comments that:

The development of their writing skills in their letter to the paper was palpable, but it didn’t flow over into their imaginary letter for the simple reason that “let’s pretend” isn’t real, doesn’t matter, lacks any investment, and won’t get a worthwhile response. (p. 114) Fox’s point is important: caring about writing often means caring about the genuine response of a reader. We would like to argue, though, that “let’s pretend” *can* work, if and when the other

players are invested fully. In other words, just because it's a game doesn't mean that the response isn't real. In fact, we have suggested via sharing the examples from Ptolemy and Edgar Allen Poe, that POOT being a game can actually allow the writing and the responses to be even more rich than they might be otherwise, and in a paradoxical sense, more real.

Playing with the Power of Words

One of the topics we explore within the POOT environment, and especially within the context of our scenario about the Turkish woman being arrested, was the power of words. In order to dramatize this theme, we gradually introduced seemingly benign intrusions of authority into the online simulation activity. For example, the postings made by the Turkish woman had 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 expressed concern about these events found that their speeches had mysteriously disappeared from the site, and Poe soon became a leading dissenter (egged on partly by a note placed secretly in the student's actual school locker, suggesting that Poe should watch what he was saying). Poe ultimately responded to this provocation by announcing the formation of a watchdog committee, called the Alhambra Security Committee, or 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...

Ultimately, Poe and his cohorts won the day, and the Chief Magistrate was forced out (though he was allowed to choose his successor, Eleanor of Aquitaine). More importantly, though, this discord led to a series of impassioned conversations about whether speech should be constrained, and about what rules (if any) ought to govern respectful discourse. One on-line discussion thread contained the following posts, among many others. (All three posts were made 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 [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 off-line as well, with middle school students and university students alike grappling with the same issues. There is no question that our conversations about these topics were

decidedly more animated by virtue of having, as it were, lived the experience.

What Matters About POOT: The Social Nature of the Experience and its Meaningfulness

Like any game, what happens in POOT at once matters a great deal and doesn't matter at all. On one hand what the students write in POOT "matters" in a way very different than most schoolwork, because there are people "out there" who are reading and responding. In another sense, though, what happens in POOT doesn't 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 World Cup matters a great deal and at the same time not at all. It allows a complete investment of energy, and an opportunity to take risks, knowing that in the end, it's "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.

This dualism -- mattering and at the same time not mattering -- is perhaps the most radical pedagogical effect of all, because it breaks down the usual barriers to reading and writing—what we might call the "invisible barriers to literacy" -- in the classroom. For students, the process of writing has become the prototypical question of figuring out *what the teacher wants*. By its very structure, POOT creates a different audience in which the role of the teacher is not eliminated as such, but necessarily takes back stage to interaction with mentors and peers (who can, within the simulation activity, include the teachers themselves), all of whom are engaged in the rather more egalitarian field of play among fellow-characters. Thus, when the student playing Edgar Allan Poe is working with his teacher to formulate his response to another character's posting, the sense of audience -- the "other people out there" who will be reading it -- supplants, or at least diminishes, the more familiar student-producing-for-teacher-relationship. This rather vividly frames what another POOT teacher called the students' efforts to "live up to the standards" of his or her character. There often unfolds a potentially powerful combination of an effort to make the character real and recognizably human, while seeking to do justice to the biographical reality of the character's life and to honor that character's achievements. Many of the students participating in POOT take the business of representing their characters to be a quite serious matter, especially as they know that others are attending to their words: this is a powerful animating force for the simulation.

There are two things going on here, two keys aspects to any POOT simulation, which we believe merit particular attention. In the first instance, the POOT simulation exemplifies and elucidates the intrinsic *sociability* of learning and, we would argue, by extension, the acquisition of literacy (Vygotsky, 1978). It is clear to us that the POOT simulation furnishes an arena for students to work out, in a distinctively interactive and interpersonal fashion, intellectual activity that typically takes place within the individual consciousness of the historian or scholar: the process of examining, questioning, interrogating, challenging, refining. In POOT, students engage in challenging intellectual activity of this kind, and all such activity is played out in relation to other characters in the simulation activity. From this vantage point, POOT might be characterized as an inherently dialogical learning project, as it is through play and *interplay* that the student comes to own and (in the lusory sense of the term) deploy his or her character. This kind of interanimation of voices resonates with what has been explored in a more theoretical register in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, which, while not something that can be given adequate consideration here, may nonetheless prove instructive. 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 with reference to issues in 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 very hard at effecting -- and the "weaving in and out of complex relationships" lies at the very heart of the experience any POOT simulation aims to create. Indeed, a recurrent theme in POOT is the notion of provocation: in the scenarios we devise, the characters we select and in the kinds of exchanges that we foster, one of our prime tasks as instructors and mentors in any POOT simulation is "to keep it interesting" by making it as interactive and provocative as possible.

The question of what we are trying to provoke touches upon the second key aspect of POOT:

meaningfulness. Quite paradoxically, within the dualism of “mattering and at the same time not mattering,” it is what takes place in the “does-not-matter” realm of games and imaginative play that is often precisely what is *most* meaningful to students and meaningful, moreover, in ways that often neatly align with recognizable and desirable pedagogical outcomes. Students are notoriously (if often quite understandably) unable to grasp the importance of historical events—at least as presented in standard chalk-and-talk approaches to history. *Why does it matter who won at Waterloo, or that the Iberian Peninsula was once ruled by Muslim Arab rulers?* But once a student assumes the responsibility of credibly articulating the perspective of Napoleon or an Umayyad Caliph, understanding something about the character he or she portrays becomes essential to being able to participate in this interactive domain. The paradox is that in participating in something that “doesn’t matter” (a game) what was formerly seen as not mattering (history, in a word) becomes profoundly meaningful. What we observe is, as students must contend within a lusory microcosm of competing ideas and values, and hold their own as they interact with other characters, it all matters very much indeed.

The focus on meaningfulness introduces a third term that is important for understanding what unfolds in an activity like POOT: *contextuality*. Meaning is by its very nature, context-bound, always a question of how things are framed and the conditions that make them intelligible to those for whom they have importance. The business of history is by its very nature a quest for context. “What were they thinking?” is a very good place to begin any history lesson, and one doesn’t get very far in finding an answer without training one’s eye on context (Bain & Mirel, 1982). By extension, the “lusory world” of POOT is ineluctably a question of creating a context that is always contrived, hypothetical, fictional, and impossible, but one that allows for the exploration of contexts that are or were, quite the contrary, established, recorded, verifiable and, in that sense, quite real.

Students are highly skilled at finding the most efficient way to attain school-imposed goals, such as passing a test, completing an assignment, or getting the correct answer to a question. The problem is that the most efficient way -- the “just get it done” way -- often allows the student to circumvent thought and activity that could lead to learning. We want students not just to strive toward task completion goals, but to approach tasks in ways that may be less efficient, but more conducive to learning. Furthermore, we want students not to simply tolerate these inefficiencies, but to embrace them.

We have argued that we can engage students over and above the basic requirements of school tasks -- we can encourage them, if you will, to take a lusory attitude toward their studies -- by placing them in the rich context of a game such as POOT. The game creates a reason to embrace inefficiencies, and to “voluntarily attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”

But are elaborate games the only way to get students to take this attitude? Are there more basic principles at work? We do not presume to have a complete answer to this question. As we reflected upon what unfolds in the distinctively interactive learning space of an activity such as POOT, however, our attention was drawn to a couple of incidents that point to something that often emerges within games, or is facilitated by elaborately planned lessons, but that has a significance that extends beyond them.

The first incident took place at the very end of the very last day for seniors at a high school where one of our colleagues teaches history. As the last students left his room, one of them stopped in the doorway. “By the way, I hate you,” she said to our colleague. They had a good teacher-student relationship, so he was quite sure that this student did not actually hate him, and waited for her to go on. “You never wrote me back about the paper I sent you. I bet you didn’t even read it,” she accused.

My colleague looked at her seriously. “Not only did I read it, but I read it aloud to two other teachers,” he said. “That was the most important paper I have read all year.” The student’s face softened, her irritation gone. “That was the only thing I’ve ever written high school that I poured my soul into,” she said.

As it happened, the very next day we asked one of the POOT participants for advice about how we, as project managers and mentors, could make the program better. He told us, in essence, that we should focus less on asking questions and more on responding seriously to what the participants say. “Most of the time I tried to [write] so [other players] would understand it, so I could get... a reaction.... I liked when they *responded* to me, and not so much when they asked me a question in response to a question.”

There may be a simple lesson here -- one that involves something far more basic than setting up intricate games for our students: it is the singular experience of being taken seriously, of having one’s speech attended to, of *being actually heard*. As teachers, we spend a great deal of energy designing assignments for our students. We pride ourselves on setting just the right task, asking just the right questions. Sometimes it seems that it is the most important part of our jobs and it is, after all, an efficient approach: with careful planning, even large

groups of students can stay busy, and their work will hum along. But perhaps we should spend at least as much energy on something inherently less efficient

but infinitely more valuable: listening to our students, and attending to our responses to them.

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