

# Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

GAMES WITHIN GAMES: THE ROLE OF THE GLITCH

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## ABSTRACT

A glitch' is a faculty-imposed crisis in a game environment. Its principal applicability is in management development courses, where it serves both as an entertainment and as a way to keep participants open to learning. Some rules of thumb for glitching are presented and sample glitches are described. Risks involved with glitches are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The world of the management development short course is potentially very different from the conventional academic world, calling for very different teaching strategies. One such strategy is a procedure nicknamed the "glitch", a planned crisis in a game environment. The discussion below is an attempt to distill the lessons learned from half a dozen years of glitching in the short course environment. Since the glitch has been notably less successful in the classroom, that potential application is not discussed. It is possible to note, however, that many of the factors distinguishing the one environment from the other are the same ones that make the glitch work for short courses.

The obvious intent of the user of management games is to use the game in sane sense as a vehicle for a learning process. In that use, the players adopt roles in what we may term the game world. One could even argue that the extent to which players become immersed in such roles is a measure of the success of the game. A further step in this role-adoption process involves faculty also adopting roles.

## SHORT COURSES

The context in which the role-adoption occurs is that of management development short courses. Some of the courses are regularly scheduled courses operated by Georgia State University's Center for Management Education, while others are offered as private ventures. Many of the same faculty tend to be involved time after time, so that there has grown a pool of experience, a shared philosophy, and practically a feeling of family among those faculty offering the courses. That the courses are successful can be seen not only in the consistently high ratings given by participants, but more importantly in the fact that a number of companies send employees to every offering of certain courses. There are even instances in which completion of a particular course is considered prerequisite to certain promotions.

Some courses are one week long, while others involve two week sessions. The choice of games used also varies, but certain descriptors are common across all of our short-course offerings which are successful and game-based. All are intense immersion experiences, typically involving the participants from 7 a.m. until anywhere from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Needless to say, participation of individuals in questionable health is discouraged.

All are held at remote locations. The attractions of a town like Atlanta are inconsistent with the kind of complete immersion a game-based course requires. All are balanced in topic coverage. Not only are there functional area topics and faculty, but also

"quantitative faculty to lecture and consult in the decision sciences as well as behavioral faculty to deal with behavioral issues.

A short course can not successfully operate like a normal academic course. Art academic course lasts two to four months, carries credit toward a presumably desirable degree, and is part of a course of study in which the student must maintain a satisfactory standing in order to continue eligibility. Learning is generally demonstrated through some combination of the performance of research, the writing of papers, and the passing of examinations. By way of contrast, a short course typically lasts one to two weeks. may or may not be at all elective, and is hideously expensive. Learning is demonstrated by improved performance as a manager, as perceived by either the participant or by the superior who sent him/her.

The only way we have found to reasonably consistently produce acceptable learning results within these limitations is based on the notion of unfreezing. The participant may be conceptualized as arriving at the course wrapped in a protective shell. It is our job to crack and remove that shell (unfreeze the participant), keep off both the shell and the dangers it was designed to protect against for the duration of the program, then help the participant to reestablish whatever protective barriers may still be needed before leaving.

A number of factors come to bear on the process of unfreezing the participants and keeping them unfrozen. Some are as conceptually simple as providing a supportive climate and encouraging them to be supportive of their teammates. Others are environmental; the quiet of a low key and nearly telephone free resort in absence of most normal office and family pressures. On a more Machiavellian level, the participant is kept under programmed pressure, kept busy twelve to eighteen hours a day. Finally, and very importantly, he<sup>1</sup> loses his protection of a familiar role as he<sup>1</sup> moves into a work group (game team) with no pre-existing authority structure and with strong encouragement to adopt unfamiliar functional responsibilities.

In a typical one-week short course the participant arrives on a Sunday afternoon after a 90 mile drive, checks in and drops off luggage, and immediately finds himself shuttled back and forth among lecture sessions, get-acquainted exercises, computer introductions, game team meetings, and behavioral briefing. At some point after 9 p.m. he is finally free

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously here and in all future references, "he" may be "she." This has been obvious for only 3 or 4 years; before that time, he was he, period.

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to go talk with his roommates and dig into reading assignments. Then on Monday morning the pace picks up!

There is a rather predictable cycle for the typical participant. It begins with anticipation and some fear of the unknown. The next stage is bewilderment, confusion, and self-doubt. He begins to master some parts of his new environment, control others, and find others to be more helpful and friendly than threatening. This leads to an almost euphorically open stage which is highly productive both in terms of learning rate and affect toward fellow participants and faculty. This very desirable high might begin by late afternoon on Monday and continues until Wednesday afternoon, when a recreation break is almost mandatory and certainly customary. At this point a mental exhaustion has set in, combined with an overconfident feeling of mastery of this new environment. Unchecked, the natural progression is into boredom and dissatisfaction because normal short-course procedures just do not seem to maintain the challenge up to the level with which the participant has already established his ability to cope.

Another way of describing this process is by pointing out that the open, unfrozen State into which the participant/player has been shocked is not a habitual state. While the remoteness of the setting breaks enough routines that it is easier to accept more broken patterns, this alienation from habitual roles cannot go forever unnoticed. Normally the first time the pressure is broken, the participant has a chance to begin to refreeze. From his viewpoint this is comforting, but from the learning viewpoint it is premature. If he is permitted to remain re-frozen the rate of learning seems to drop off radically, and the remaining impression is one of the pressures of the first part of the program superimposed upon the reduced learning rate of the latter portion. This cannot be ignored!

It is on Wednesday (Or in a two week course, Sunday night or Monday of the second week) that we have found it productive to intervene with what we have come to call either the crisis, or more informally, the glitch. Although the glitch always ostensibly has an academic objective, its principal purpose is to reestablish the challenge and thus the high. By releasing and reestablishing tension and disequilibrating the game, enough challenge (and often plain fun) is put back into the situation to carry the program to its close.

Wednesday is usually the recreation day, on which the participant has an afternoon available for golf, tennis, sleep, or other sports. In a one week program, the course has definitely peaked by Wednesday (as is true of the second Monday in a two week course). Although the re-freezing process has begun, the player is still "in role." Thus the glitch, playing as it must to this role, may have enough impact to reverse the refreezing process.

### SUCCESSFUL GLITCHING

Bringing off a glitch successfully is no easy trick. Once a program is truly successful, it is impossible to standardize a glitch because a folklore develops within client companies and is often passed on to people who are to be sent to the program. If participants expect a strike, that can enhance your glitch - unless it's a strike. An implication of this is that you must have a new glitch each time - or at least one that has not been used for quite a while.

There are some rules of thumb which have been evolved for successful glitch use. These are:

- Glitches ought not repeat in the short (two to three year) run. That way they are harder to anticipate, and more "freshly" executed.
- 2 - A glitch must have an acceptable academic point. This shouldn't be true, but it only takes one Ralph Nadir type to destroy you otherwise.
- 3 - No glitch ought ever carry any physical risk differing from the remainder of the program. It is essential to remember that, despite some inescapable similarity, glitches are not fraternity hazing.
- 4 - The glitch should be fun. More unbroken deadly seriousness your participants don't need.
- 5 - The glitch should involve negotiation, with a chance for the participants to feel that they "won." The alternative is an act of G.O.D. (Game Overall Director) and is pointless. The participants already know who controls the game environment.
- 6 - Glitch outcomes must be feasible. This you will understand once you are backed into executing a strike for which your game contains no provision. Of course you wanted to reprogram the game all night.
- 7 - Roles in the glitch should exist for as many participants and faculty as possible. The minimum is two participants per team and two faculty. The maximum, and preferred, level of participation involves all participants and all except behavioral faculty. Faculty are subject to basically the same cycle as participants.

There are great many possibilities left open by these restrictions. Some scenarios which have either been used or set aside for future use include the following:

The direct labor force demand large pay increase. Alternative is strike.

The maintenance force demand very large pay increase. Alternative is strike.

The direct labor force demand large pay increase. Alternative is binding arbitration.

Most of supply of one raw material for quarter is lost at sea. Hoarders offer their hoards to highest bidder. Either a commodity floor is opened or a professional auctioneer is engaged.

Most of supply of one raw material for quarter has been hijacked. Shady character sets up meet of team with "Da Boss." Leads to a nice kangaroo court.

A variety of other scenarios have been proposed which for one reason or other have either proven unsatisfactory or been rejected. In all cases, they have been in violation of one or more of the guidelines mentioned above. It is critically important that the glitch be successful. A poor glitch can bring the program down as far as a good one can hold it up. Thus the guidelines, which were evolved through some hard experience, ought not be ignored.

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It is not accidental that behavioral faculty are always withheld from roles in the glitch. There are several good reasons for this. In these short courses they try to spend as much time as possible in the background. The more effectively they can fade into the woodwork, the more the behavior they observe and feedback to the players is unbiased by their presence. A glitch role would destroy the possibility of a behaviorist remaining unobtrusive. Additionally, their position "off to one side" permits them to examine proposed glitch scenarios dispassionately. This enables them, perhaps more readily than other faculty, to foresee and thus forestall disasters. Finally, their lack of role in the glitch helps reduce the risks inherent in the use of glitches. Should anything go wrong, be it one offended player or a total disaster, they are faculty whom all of the players know to be unconnected with the glitch.

### SUMMARY

In the context of management development short courses, much higher learning productivity is possible *if* the participant is induced into and maintained in a mentally open, "unfrozen" state. This is not an especially comfortable state, so when the pressure is relieved a closing or re-freezing process begins. The glitch is a faculty imposed crisis in the game environment which can be used to temporarily restore the unfrozen state. Like any tool that tampers with attitudes and mental states, it ought to be used with care and with respect.