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HUMOR AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL: USE IN FORMAL GAME PRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Humor has raised its merry head in simulation game play. During end-of-game formal presentations of strategies and results, game teams entertain as well as analyze by means of jokes and overhead projector cartoons. The evidence of many such occurrences of humor indicate that it serves several purposes as teams report how they managed their simulated companies. Examples of this humor are given and a taxonomy of purposes is developed.

INTRODUCTION

Recent articles by Duncan [2] and Malone [3] recognize that humor has been a management tool for a very long time, yet little is known about this complex topic. These articles point out that humor, especially the joke, in the right situation can help managers achieve their goals and also that humor inappropriately used may have negative managerial effects.

Positive uses of humor include reducing anxiety, smoothing over of a failure, avoiding potentially hostile situations, alleviating boredom of work, facilitating different friendship patterns, relieving tension, fostering group cohesiveness, and providing communication otherwise not socially acceptable.

Psychological and Interpersonal Aspects of Game Play

As most game administrators know, a great deal of psychological player behavior occurs during game play. These reactions usually vary with success or failure as the game unfolds. Also, responses exhibited by players in the same class of performance, say success, also varies. Just how these psychological reactions vary with a game situation is not well understood, although there is much anecdotal information.

For games run with teams, interpersonal behavior is seen among players on a team. Leaders emerge, some players dominate through expert knowledge or sheer effort, and others are left not participating very much. It is difficult for game administrators or researchers to "get inside" a team to closely observe this interpersonal behavior. Also, much of it may occur in team meetings or telephone conversations away from the administrator's control or observation.

Additionally, there is interpersonal and intergroup behavior among teams during game play, especially for games in which teams compete. Of course, most of the interplay among teams occurs through the medium of normal game decisions, yet additional behavior has been observed: attempts at collusion, espionage, threats, criticism, and, of course, humorous interchanges of all kinds.

Behavior Changes at End of Play

In competitive simulation games, once the final decision is in and secure from further changes, intergroup communication barriers begin to relax. When final results appear, there is usually excitement and spontaneous reaction, both positive and negative. Communication among groups appears to increase and some of this communication is

humorous in nature. The author over the years has further enhanced this communication by requiring a formal end-of-game presentation by each team. The presentations are made to an audience composed of all teams competing with the presenting team and of any teams that competed in a separate parallel play of the game.

FORMAL END-OF-GAME PRESENTATIONS

Required by the author of each team is a formal end-of-game presentation that usually occurs a few days after final game results are known. Periodically during prior game play (which lasts from six to ten weeks), the assignment for this final presentation is shown as an overhead transparency, which displays the following:

Game Presentation Assignment

- Review of and changes in overall policy and strategy:
- Goals and objectives
- Strategies to achieve them
- Decisions to implement strategies
- Evaluation of results
- Reasons for results
- Review of and changes in team organization
- Time~ 10 to 15 minutes

Also, periodically during game play, examples of the overhead transparencies used by teams in the past for final game presentations are displayed. Teams are encouraged early to start collecting data and making notes for their final presentations. Suggestions for charting current progress and for recording analysis and significant game events are given.

Encouraging the Use of Humor

The author, who views himself as a bit of a raconteur, as game administrator attempts to establish an informal atmosphere during game play, yet preserving high standards for analysis and performance evaluation.

Throughout a play of the game, examples of past presentations are shown, including all humorous overhead transparencies that may have appeared. In each example. These humorous transparencies usually take the form of cartoons drawn by players. Sometimes they are clipped from periodicals and copied to transparencies. Some humorous transparencies are just words or phrases. Of course, the spoken part of presentations could and did contain much humor, either jokes independent of the overheads or comments elaborating or introducing the overheads. Also shown are all the nonhumorous charts and performance analysis overheads so players understand that the major portion of the final presentation is to be quite serious. Thus, by example, standards for the final presentation are set, including the use of humor.

Early in game play, teams are asked to create names for their companies and products. These are frequently humorous and are read back to players about one-fourth

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of the way through the full play of the game. Examples of these names are shown in Table 1. These names are for the IMAGINIT Automobile Industry in which teams start with a low price car in one market (Product A-1) and may bring out another low price car (Product A-2) in the same market and/or a luxury car (Product B-1).

A TAXONOMY OF HUMOR USES

From a collection of several years of the overheads used by teams for final games presentation, a taxonomy of purposes for which humor was used was developed. The taxonomy is given below along with descriptions of representative examples of the humorous overheads. This taxonomy differs somewhat from the management uses of humor suggested by Malone [3] and Duncan [2] but then the formal end-of-play presentation is a very specific one-time situation not strictly comparable to ongoing managerial responsibilities.

Of particular interest is the difference of the status barrier found in real management situations. Traylor [4] observed that the status of a person was inversely related to the frequency of being the object or focus of a joke. Contrary to this conclusion, it appeared that humor in the final game presentations provided players with an opportunity to aim humor at the game administrator (assuming he was seen as a person of higher status than players), making him the focus of jokes on the overheads and of verbal comment.

One of the dominant uses of overhead transparency cartoon humor has been by teams introducing themselves and showing their company and product names. Examples of these names are given in Table 1. Illustrations, usually in amateurish line drawings (sometimes in color), depict the products. The reader can imagine what might be shown in this manner for some of the product names given in Table 1. More creatively, teams have used humor to show their company names and tell something about themselves. Examples are: Barton's Baby Buggies (since 1980, the team that won) showed a logotype of a jet-propelled pram; Junior Samples Auto Company showed its office as a rural shack in Tahoka, Texas; Acme Auto (which did not win) illustrated a broken down car with hood and deck lid up, smoking engine, and flat tires, and showed its Product A-1 as Slow Joe riding backwards on a mule; Road Hog Motor Company showed a pig-faced "Boss Hog." Logotypes associated with company names included a stylistic "Muthur," a lemon, a windstorm, and a branding iron (for Texas Motors, of course). Billie Joe Bob's headquarters was an outhouse; another team's was a local saloon, illustrated by a mug of suds and a bowl of chips. This use of humor, since it elaborates on early-game name choices has not been included in the taxonomy of humor as used in final game presentations. The taxonomy developed from final game presentations follows. The classifications are given in the order of most frequent appearance of the described use of humor.

I. To Smooth Over Failure.--The most frequent appearance of humor was to smooth over failure of various degrees, even if a team placed second out of five, say. Some of this humor took the form of rationalizations. Examples are: Lists of mistakes (usually in bold letters), some identified with illustrated screws followed by the word up. Initial goals and objectives invariably are to win the game

and make an 'A'--then ending goals or revised goals include "to do as little as possible," "just get in the B' range," "at least end without damaging the

TABLE 1
EXAMPLE COMPANY AND PRODUCT NAMES
The IMAGINIT Automobile Industry

Company Name	Names of Products		
	A-1	A-2	B-1
Texas Motors "the brand that stands alone) (with a branding iron logo)	QR3		Cowboy Cadillac
Barton's Bombs	Cherry Bomb		Sparkler
Champion Auto	Reliable	The Competitor	Cloud "9"
Lugos	Wego	Theygo	Ugo
Road Hog Motor Company	Porky Pickup		Heavy-Chevy
Pride of Detroit Motor Co.	3B-28		Smilin' & Stylin'
Originators, Inc.	Low Rider		Lemon-Zine
Muthur's Motors	M-16		Monte Muthur
Snappy Car Company	Turtle		Tortoise
No Class Motors	Willitstart		Caddy
Junior Samples Auto Company, Inc.	Junior Bug		Samples Seville
Arabian Motors	Peasant Mobile		Sheik Special
No Name Motors	Incognito		Anonymous
South Plains Motors (with blowing wind logo)	Rustbucket		Guzzler Mark V
No-Lemons Car Corp. (with lemon logo)	GXR-45		Pinot
	986XXX		Chardonnay
			1-9-1*
Mediocre Motors	Gas Horse	Red Raider	Chaffin (a real loser) Cruiser
Billie Joe Bobs Association	The Junk	The Spunk	The Hunk

* This refers to the record of the football team that year, a product name given at end of play.

company," "lose with dignity (and a clear conscious)," "minimize apathy, hopefully graduate from college," "just get a 'C'," "stay in the game," "not to get the ultimate flush" (a 'D'), "keep from being blown away and stay ahead of Firm 22," and "stay in third." Other humorous techniques for smoothing over failure include changing product names: The World Motor Company changed its Edsel to Lesde (Edsel spelled backwards) and renamed its luxury car the L. L. (Luxury Loser). Muthur appeared flashing a thigh on a graph that showed Muthurs Motors fell behind the industry at the end. Kilroy was shown sinking into the ocean, hanging onto a wave instead of a wall top; one team depicted itself as

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a blindfolded archer shooting crooked arrows completely off target at the market quote criterion for winning. Another showed itself as a sailboat riding the ups and downs of the waves of earnings. The distribution channel was shown as cracked (a cracked pipeline) followed by the famous TV sign-off "and now you know the rest of the story." A team was shown as occupants of a roller coaster climbing an impossible track (that would turn them upside down). A firm was represented by a robed person diving into Barton's Bay. Another, having reached in one cartoon the top of the mountain, in the next transparency had taken the big dive into the bottomless pit at the mountain base. A horse race was labeled with firm numbers, the presenting team winning at the first decision; this changed at play end to the team represented as a riderless horse backing up to the finish line (last, of course). One graph of the criterion market quote was sprinkled with sharp comments ranging from "woe" to "no worry." Another team lead off its presentation with "The Fall and Fall of Team 53, An American Failure Story." A team that took a strike by Monte Carlo simulation said on a transparency, "We were chosen by probability." Evaluating its results, a team cartooned a yet-fresh reeking cowchip. Another team did a sequence (story board) of transparencies showing the firm logo (a sailboat), its products, itself as one person in a boat labeled Barton's Baby, which sinks leaving the cartoon character standing on the bow holding an umbrella while the only cloud in the sky rains on him, then sinking but managing to swim, almost drowning (one hand showing), then with a new problem (a shark approaches), staying out of the hole (photograph of jeans and shoe bottoms almost flushed down a commode), then a globe lights up over the shark (a new idea), that leads to graduation (cartoon character in mortar board).

2. To Criticize a Teammate.--Humor at final presentation time allows some players to express feelings toward each other in a manner that may have been inexpressible earlier during play. Negative "jokes with a player as object or focus occur more frequently than positive praise, yet the meaning of an apparent humorous attack may actually be praise through subtle connotations of spoken words as the overheads are shown. In reports of their small-group organization, teams may show a fictitious leader, implying that each had equal status thus none came forward to lead. The most frequent fictitious leader was the game administrator. Others were Lee A. Ioyuaceocaccola and The Force.

Team members who apparently contributed little were drawn in organization charts as afterthoughts, as taking a headlong dive into a toilet bowl from which the other team members were emerging, and in verbal comments as "just there, never showed up," "a ghost," or a "phantom." One team member was simply ignored by the others and left sitting silently in the audience (but this was not very humorous).

Some teams implied in their presentations criticism of all members. One showed each team member as a hangman's noose, another showed team members as coaches (with one the "punting" coach), another verbally described lurid pasts and present behaviors of each member, and, most frequently, all team members were depicted as funny cartoon characters. The most elaborate humorous representation of an entire team was a set of ten transparency reproduced photographs, each of a costumed chimpanzee. Captions on the first four of these identified team member names and titles, then additional chimpanzee transparencies depicted these persons in role settings (one girl was a chimpanzee Dallas Cowboys cheerleader). Verbally, one member of a team that won, said they had acted as consultants, were now hired as top

management, except one member who became head of the typing pool (but this was reverse praise since this member had high peer ratings).

3. To Reduce Tension.--That simulation games can create both tense moments and ongoing tension is well known from general information reported by game users. While intermediate favorable game results may relieve the tension of specific decision situations, the generalized tension of game play is not ameliorated until the end of play. Tension reduction comes about in final game presentations through various kinds of expressions of frustration or of other feelings and through symbolic termination of game activity.

One player showed its purported employee fringe benefits decisions as dots on a graph, then in front of the audience connected these in child-puzzle style to create a smiling face. A team, showing its goals and objectives, had marked out a line and added "oops!" Another represented its goals as question marks, some upside down. A team introduced its final presentation as "Mickey Mouse Analysis by Team 41," then did a thorough analytical job. Another team offered advice on how to win: read the book (helpful); play as a winner (kill); be a step ahead of others (step on them); cheat (losers choice); bribe the game administrator (our maximum bribe \$30); and Weller and water (most effective). Graphs are important parts of the final game presentation and some teams show crude one- liners (graphs, that is) with perhaps a one-line overlay depicting their positions.

Finally, the ultimate tension relief is to go off for a beer. One team flashed an overhead of Now comes Miller time. Muthurs Motors showed Muthur, mini- skirted to kill, with champagne and glasses in hand and the caption 'time to party.

4. To Boast About Winning --Of course, teams that finally win are relieved by this fact knowing they have accomplished their goals in the face of competition and uncertainty, and knowing they have earned an "A." Some winning teams appear to need further tension relief and use the final game presentation situation to boast about their wins. The most obvious transparency for this use of humor is a giant-lettered "WE WON!" Variations include: 'We von without cheating' (showing smiling faces); "Thanks to you, we won" (showing the lesser performance of other teams in a stylized graph topped by a cartoon handshake); and "excellent" as a team's self evaluation of achieving its original goal to win. In the fall term, footballs are shown sailing over the goal posts (one carefully labeled "not a cash cow").

A winning team of graduating seniors showed itself as one person driving off with mortar board on head; the caption was "Happiness is Lubbock, Texas, in your rear view mirror," which cites a recent popular song. Champion Auto cartooned itself as a male strong-man crunching other teams in his fists. Another cartooned its industry as a missionary in a boiling pot and itself as a scantily-clad native; the caption was 'Actually, we weren't always cannibals.' The final chimpanzee overhead, the set of these described earlier, showed a regally dressed chimp with the caption We are like kings!" A natural way to view game competition is as a race to the finish. One team represented itself as a turtle arriving first at the finish line labeled "A" and its competitors as a bunny that took a strike, a pinball machine, a puffy cloud, and a snail (which came in last). Another, using two overheads, illustrated a car race, with all even at the starting line then at the finish with itself winning by a hood.

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5. To Be Aggressive Toward Authority.-Authority in the stake, is the game administrator who is also the teacher. Humor is used to express feelings about and toward this authority. Verbal comments alone or along with transparencies are frequent (thus, aggression toward the grader is not all for the written record, and hence not saved for purposes of this paper). The most frequent assertive or aggressive expression is to use the teacher's name in some context. A few company names in Table 1 show this. In a sequence of four overheads, a team narrated. In the beginning Barton created . . . (next overhead) "Team 23 and it was Good!!" (next overhead) "there were three wisemen" (a bit of self-praise) who (next overhead) "kept their original goals" (to win of course) that included convincing the teacher to buy one of its luxury cars. A team, one of whose members knew of the teacher's interest in sailing, played on this theme in a sequence of overheads described earlier (in which the shark appeared). Muthurs Motors reproduced a magazine color cartoon of Muthur kicking and screaming at the preacher (labeled the Reverend Barton) during graveside services over a coffin (labeled Team 65) in an open grave. Verbally, a team began its presentation, "Barton's Baby Buggies began its humble operations in 1890. Mr. Barton, then a young man, believed his business to be transportation. For 30 years, Barton's firm sold wagons, bicycles and baby buggies. Because Mr. Barton knew his business was transportation, he always strategically planned the introduction of new products into the market. In 1920, he introduced the Gas Horse, the Chaffin Cruiser, and the Colby 1-9-1 Red Raider Machine. He had moderate success with these horseless carriages and his company continued to grow. Until year zero, Mr. Barton ran the business himself, with the help of his sons, but was not an industry leader. In year zero, Mr. Barton decided to hire a management team to run the company so he could concentrate on producing his new line of cars the GXR-45986XXX and the Pinot Chardonnay."

Another purpose of aggressive humor is to complain. The most often verbal complaint is by teams that took Monte Carlo simulation strikes. Their complaint is "it's not fair." Obviously, these teams had not protected themselves with sufficient inventory to cover work stoppages. Another complaint is that the game annual is hard to read (one overhead captioned "Insights for future play" showed a giant question mark, another showed a diagram from the manual captioned "Disregard Barton's Law, it doesn't make sense"). Another complaint is the amount of time required to play the game, especially slowness of the Interactive computer decision support system (which degrades under user pressure). One team showed itself eating out of a lunch box at the computer terminal, the moon and stars in the window, the clock showing an hour after decision deadline, and the CRT displaying "Decisions are being simulated. Please wait two hours." Perhaps the most dramatic complaint by a team with poor performance was the presentation of a real lesson to the game administrator. The lemon had been adapted to look like an automobile with bottle cap wheels, swizzle stick axles, glass bead headlights, drinking straw exhausts (duals), red match-head tail lights, a glass chip windshield, and cherry stem and toothpick radio and CB antenna.

6. To Criticize Another Team.-To blame others, or to acknowledge their unintended help is another use of humor in final game presentations. Such statements as "Team 59 advertised before producing" (thus giving away its new product strategy) and Team 57 went for broke and broke" are typical. Other examples are "Team 62, thanks for dropping Product A-2 (signed) Team 63" and (as fulfillment of an early goal to make a positive contribution to society) "provide a retirement home for Tens 62, 63, 64, and 65

game situation, especially with college grades at when they get blown away. - A team showed a graph of the market quote criterion and labeled the winners as Cheaters - All teams but a presenting team were shown as persons in the same bed with the caption "Some groups will do anything to get corporate secrets." In one case, the criticism was focused on a single player of another team with two transparencies, first, "who shot team 43?" then Was it J.R.?" and added in view of the audience, "No, it was R.J. of Team 44."

7. To Communicate Messages Otherwise Not Acceptable.--Public humor at final game presentation time allows communication that persons may not try to express in other situations. One team dramatized its decision making technique as throwing dice multiplied by a fudge factor with a cushion added. Another said its strategy was "Go deep. Be sneaky. Cheat. Steal a code number. Bribe. Pray." Finally, Muthur of Muthurs Motors marketing technique (in a color reproduced magazine cartoon) was to "flash" the customers, skinny legs and all.

COMMENT

Knowledge of humor as a management tool is too skimpy for conclusions to be drawn in this paper. The above reports of the use of humor in formal game presentations is purely anecdotal. However, it can be noted that the categories of usage derived from the humor observed are very specific to the situation. As Duncan [2] points out, what makes something funny is a question of individual preferences. Berger [1] states that humor is ultimately related to cultural codes of behavior and what is funny provides insights into the culture's value system. This appears to be true of the classroom culture system generated by simulation game play. A great deal of classroom laughter occurs during final game presentations, but these things might not be funny to an outsider sitting in.

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