An Approach To Art Games: Playing and Planning

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Introduction

One way children learn about their world is through play. Through many repeated play experiences, children can clarify and master many fundamental physical, social, and intellectual skills and concepts (Isenberg and Jacobs, 1982). As a natural activity, play assumes many different forms. It can occur at any time or in any place. It ranges from the exploratory behavior of infants to the highly competitive sports of adults.

Marie Montessori (1966) viewed play as “child’s work” and of importance as a means of social adaptation. Freud (1959) viewed play as an expression of primary needs. Piaget (1962) agreed with Freud and additionally saw play as being the ignition of the creative imagination which would be the motor of all future thought and reason.

Types of Play

Piaget delineated three major types of play related to cognitive development: practice play, symbolic play, and games play. Practice play is characterized by repeated and varied motor behaviors without any apparent planned outcomes. A child painting repeated circular lines for the sheer joy of the activity might be engaged in practice play. Symbolic play is the process of transforming an object or oneself into another person, object, event, or situation through the use of motor or verbal actions. A make-believe situation when a building block becomes a telephone is an example of symbolic play. Symbolic play might also occur when a child begins telling a story while painting a picture, creating and naming images to represent parts of the story. Games play has prearranged rules that children must adopt and accept. Mural painting might become a game-type of play situation when the children establish certain “ground rules” for use and placement of colors and shapes.

Why Games?
Theoretical and empirical evidence supports the notion that play and games facilitate children’s cognitive development. Yawkey (1979) suggests that play is interrelated with thinking skills and intellectual development. Lieberman (1979) identifies a significant relationship between playfulness and aspects of divergent thinking. Sylva, Bruner, and Genova (1976) observe more problem-solving ability, more goal-oriented behavior, and greater persistence in children who are frequent game players.

While there are frequent claims that games are valuable learning aids (Gordon, 1972), there is little proof that education games are more effective in the presentation of subject matter than conventional
teaching procedures. The experience of this author, however, has been that art games are pleasurable learning experiences which improve student interest in the subject and provide stimulating applications of concepts. Assuming that the retention of knowledge is relative to the interest in the subject and increased by immediate application and practice, one might argue then that art games are valuable as an aide to learning, for they have the potential for increasing students' retention of subject matter.

Past practice with art games in learning situations has led some educators to conclude that children do not learn as much as they should during a game activity because they are usually too busy having fun. However, for many children, learning seems to proceed best when subject matter is introduced in a non-threatening situation, and the fun of the game activity often minimizes the tension that inhibits the processing of information. Yet there is little justification for an art game played just for fun or as something to fill up the day's schedule. All too often teachers develop a game and only hope that children will learn something. An art game should be seen as an effective teaching device with specific learning objectives and valid art content. Without valid art content, the game would collapse into meaningless social activity.

**Content for Art Games**

An art game differs from other games only in that it has art activity or art concepts as its content and outcome. An art game therefore deals with artistic skills, aesthetic values, historical facts, critical inquiry, or any other principles and concepts from the disciplines of art.

Examples of specific areas of content might include the names and varieties of sensory qualities such as colors, shapes, lines, and textures; categories of subject matter, types of art forms, and style classifications; descriptions of formal properties such as balance, contrast, repetition, and dominance; identifications of technical and forming processes; and responses to expressive characteristics, moods, and ideals involved in works of art.

**Models for Art Games**

Art games can take many forms. Games can occur informally between two individuals, or they can be organized as activities involving opposing teams. The whole class can be involved, or the play might be limited to small groups. In some games an individual can engage in solitary play, so games can be developed to encourage competition with self. Games can also be non-competitive.

Generally, art games may be categorized according to familiar gaming structures. In board games, the goals may vary, but players usually throw a die, twirl a spinner, or draw a card and move markers around a spaced-off board as directed. The player who reaches the goal first or collects the most points along the way is usually the winner. The spaces on a game board might be divided as rooms in an art gallery to be filled with works of a particular style. For a "parlor game" the
spaces might lead into "parlors" to be decorated with a particular style of furniture.

ARTICULATION: THE GALLERY GAME is an adaptable board game designed by Erickson and Katter (1977) in cooperation with the Columbus Museum of Art. Three distinct games can be played with the same playing equipment, and reproductions of art works are included with the game. The three areas of content for the games are the description of sensory and formal properties of art works, the interpretation of humanistic themes, and the identification of expressive qualities. A fourth area of content, the functions of art, requires a supplementary set of reproductions and description cards. Designed for three to five players per board, ARTICULATION employs a debate format which forces students to analyze art works from varying points of view, to verbalize their conclusions about art works, and to support their conclusions with argument and evidence. At the outset of the game, individual players make independent decisions about which art work to hang in the gallery. As the game progresses, individuals begin to compete against other individuals who might want to hang their art work in the same spot in the gallery. It then becomes necessary for a player to support his or her independent decisions with evidence acceptable to the other members of the group. The player who is successful in placing the most art works in the gallery is declared the "patron of the arts". To conclude the game, all the players must reach a consensus, that is, they must together form a collective opinion about the quality of the gallery exhibition.

Card games are another basic game structure. Usually the cards are organized in decks in which a number of cards comprise a set or meld. In art games, the cards might be art reproductions, and a meld might be composed of different works of art by one artist, works of art from a specific culture, or details from objects in nature. ARTERY is an example of a card-type game designed by Erickson and Katter (1978). The basic playing equipment is a deck of 80 descriptive word cards and 50 art reproductions. Six different colors of bingo chips (colored plastic disks about the size of a nickel) are used as tokens for scoring. Two games can be played with the same playing equipment. The areas of content for the games are subject matter, sensory elements, formal properties, technical features, and expressive qualities. In both games the student learns to describe and analyze art works by grouping together picture cards and word cards which have
something in common. In ARTERY: THE NETWORK GAME the student builds a network of art works and descriptive word cards by linking together pictures and words in a branching pattern like the game of Scrabble or dominos. In ARTERY: THE AUCTION GAME each player attempts to collect as many art works as possible by forming sets of three descriptive word cards which describe subject matter, sensory, formal, expressive, or technical features of an art work.

Puzzles are also popular game-like activities. Art prints adhered to foam-core board can be cut into simple shapes to be reassembled by the player or players. Foam-core board makes a sturdy backing and is easy to cut into rectangular or triangular shapes. The pieces need not be complex curves. The emphasis should be on matching colors, textures, or values within the art work, not on discriminating the shape of the puzzle piece. Significant shapes can be cut from inside prints so that the player is required to fit the missing shapes into the appropriate empty spaces. Mixing the pieces for two different art puzzles with distinctive painterly styles will add the challenge of style matching.

Dominoes provide a good structure for practicing identification, differentiation, and attribution of visual qualities such as open and closed forms, converging or parallel lines, sharp or fuzzy edges, etc. Small reproductions of such visual details, close-up photographs, or other visuals cut into squares can be glued side by side on foam-core rectangles to make a domino. Different sides of the square can then be matched to other squares to form linking networks of similar visual qualities.

In matching games, sets of cards might be made up of pairs of one kind of image, the same subject matter, two different paintings by one artist, or two similar shapes, etc. Images might be spread out face down in a grid and turned face-up two at a time by each player in turn as in “Concentration”, or they could be placed face down in two piles and turned up two at a time to find a match as in “Snap”. Visuals found in magazines
can be adhered to the back of self-adhesive name tags to make very serviceable sets of "Visual Snap" or "Visual Concentration" games.

Manipulative games include three-dimensional puzzles, stacking blocks, or objects to be sorted or assembled. Three-dimensional puzzle blocks can be made by cutting 4" x 4" lumber into 4" lengths on a band saw. Six art reproductions are then cut into 4" x 4" squares and the pieces glued to each of the six sides of these blocks. Stacking blocks or rings might be painted in a range of values or intensities to be ordered or arranged in sequence. Blocks can also be painted with linear patterns that will form different configurations as the blocks are stacked in different ways. Many of the visual concepts used in art production activities, such as repetition, gradation, directionality, balance, etc., can be explored and practiced through preliminary play with manipulative puzzles and games.

In scavenger games or treasure hunts, players might be asked to find particular visual details such as green apples or small red dots in an art work, to search for architectural styles in the community, to find three works by one artist, or to find three works which dramatize human suffering, conflict, or devotion. Very young children might be given small swatches of fabric such as velvet, lace, and brocade, a small piece of metal, and a feather and then directed to find paintings in which these materials are represented.

Pencil and paper games include such activities as word-grams, word searches, and cross-word puzzles. They are useful for art vocabulary building and review.

Simulation games are usually action-oriented and usually have a scenario, teams with assigned strategies and tactics, and a target or goal to work toward. For an art-based simulation game, the target might be a group mural or a clay sculpture. The scenario would identify conflicting values or ideas, set the scene, and give direction or purpose to the game. It might be about planning for growth such as a flower garden or a city; things changing such as land use or customizing a car; or discovering, inventing, or creating — such as a space journey, a transportation system, or a new life form.
Teams are designated to represent the contrasting ideas, forces or moods developed in the scenario. There might be from two to five teams with from two to five players on each team. In a town planning game, the teams might be architects, conservationists, road builders, and railway constructors. In a game directed toward designing a mural of a flower garden, the teams might represent different theories of art such as realism, expressionism, formalism, and pragmatism.

Each team is then assigned specific shapes, colors, lines, visual effects, or particular patterns and symbols that might be appropriate. Tactics such as appropriate techniques, types of brushwork, rules for dealing with overlaps, color mixing, and outlining are also assigned to each team. A brief, detailing the strategies and tactics, must be prepared for each team.

The simulation game's target must always embody the idea of the appropriate representation of each team's interests and the unity of the finished work (Pavey, 1979). Rules must be carefully developed and materials and work space well organized. Suggested general rules for playing simulation games and a format for a worksheet for planning a simulation game can be found in Don Pavey's (1979) wonderful book on ART-BASED GAMES.

Another type of role-playing game is one in which the game actually teaches the learner a particular process or mode of behavior. ARTIFACT, another Erickson/Katter (1981) collaboration, is essentially a role playing game which introduces learners to the mode of inquiry which art historians use to study their subject. It includes a series of increasingly more complex game structures which cause the student to practice art historical behaviors in the order of their complexity. ARTIFACT: GAME ONE requires students to establish dates (decades) within which each work was produced. ARTIFACT: GAME TWO requires students to match detailed descriptions with the particular objects described. ARTIFACTS: GAME THREE requires students to interpret objects, making use of information about the times within which that object was produced. Game four requires that the learner develop an explanation which accounts for change in visual objects using information about the changing times. The playing
equipment includes 54 visual cards depicting six different designed objects through nine decades, 54 description cards, one for each object, and 54 cards noting such cultural characteristics as social, economic, popular entertainment, technological, and political events for each decade.

**Guidelines For Art Game Planning**

Whatever the game structure may be, there are certain procedures a teacher should follow when planning an art game. The first step in game planning is to identify the learning to be accomplished.

Games can be especially successful in focusing the pupils’ attention on a particular set of concepts, so a teacher should initially define specific teaching objectives, identify concepts, and establish the scope of the subject content which will receive attention. By first identifying the learning problem or need and then selecting the game structure that will best help the student or group of students in understanding the concept to be taught, a teacher can avoid the pitfall of conducting a fun but meaningless activity.

The game structure, while of secondary consideration, is nevertheless very important. The best art learning games are those which are simple in operation and require a balance of mental, physical, and emotional involvement on the part of the player-learners. For many children, multi-sensory, touchable materials provide for the exercise of motor and manipulative functions which help to internalize learnings. Through manipulative, participatory exercise, children’s attention spans are appreciably lengthened.

Another important element to remember in gaming is to keep the rules explicit, regardless of the age or performance level of the group for whom the game is designed. Students often become frustrated when game rules are vague and unclear. With young children the rules and scoring should be short and simple. More mature children can be involved in elaborate games with complex rules, but the rules must be clearly explained and easy to understand.

Many games are constructed so that an individual player or a group of players can win or at least reach some reward or goal. The notion of a game implies that there will be winners and losers. It may not always be desirable to place too much emphasis on the winning of the game, for competition may have a bad effect on some learners, and for some students the reward of winning may become more important than the content presented. If individual competition is to be minimized, a group goal can become a part of the game plan. A good art game should be constructed and organized so that all those who play will learn and the child that needs the most practice gets it. The game planner should keep in mind that an essential characteristic of a learning game is that it involves mental activity on the part of each pupil. In a good game situation, even the loser can be a winner.

**A Checklist for Planning Your Game**

Identifying the Problem:

- Who is the learner?
- What is the need of the learner?
What concept is to be presented?
What are the components of the concept to be represented? (scope of subject matter)
What is the objective?

Implementation:
What kind of activity will best help the learner understand the concept and achieve the objective?
What conditions and/or settings are appropriate?
Is the activity for use by an individual, a small group, or a large group?
How will the game be played?
What are the materials required for the game?
Is it competitive or non-competitive?
What is the reward or goal?

Evaluation:
Does the game introduce a new concept? Explain a concept? Reinforce understanding? Summarize learnings?
Does the game focus attention on a single concept or a set of interrelated concepts?
Does the game provide immediate feedback?
Does the game motivate the learner and stimulate interest in the subject matter?
How can you assess what the game is teaching?
How can you facilitate transfer of learning?
Are the rules and scoring simple and easy to understand?
Are the materials safe and durable?
Is the packaging practical, sturdy, and attractive?

Conclusion
In a game situation, a player is building an ability for analyzing, hypothesizing, and developing generalizations. In adapting to and choosing among various alternatives which are a part of all games, a player is practicing skills in decision making and increasing self-confidence in making choices. The immediate feedback which game activities provide, especially with points and scoring, helps the players to examine the consequences of their choices, examine their progress, and judge their own performances. After all, it doesn’t really matter whether you win or lose, but how you play the game!

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Bibliography