Fantasy Games Create Real Leaders

What do King Arthur and modern high tech companies have in common? Both require a highly skilled workforce.

Games are used in many cultures to teach and practice a variety of critical skills. The tournaments of the King Arthur stories were serious games designed to maintain martial skills in peacetime. Modern sports are the present day incarnation of the serious games of the past: fencing, kendo, judo, gymnastics, and pentathlon, to name but a few. Each of these sports once represented the battlefield skills of the elite warrior. Masters of these sports learn early that success comes from being fully involved and from testing their skills under pressure.

In the twenty-first century, sword fighting in a corporate boardroom has fallen out of favor. The serious games of today need to focus on a different set of skills: leadership, negotiation, teamwork, public speaking, improvisation, persuasion, decision making with incomplete information, and remaining calm under pressure. Like its predecessors, the modern, serious game must fully involve participants, forcing them to solve actual problems within the engrossing and absorbing context of the game. In real-life, corporate situations, feedback may take weeks or months. By the time it is clear that something is not working, it is difficult to identify cause and effect. By taking on a role within a fantasy scenario, players are forced to make decisions and face the consequences of their actions within a few hours.

All businesses need to provide leadership to their members, motivate employees, and negotiate with individuals and organizations. The problem lies in practicing those skills in an environment that does not feel artificial. Because people learn best when they are enjoying themselves, a well-constructed, serious game will provide an entertaining scenario with sufficient challenge that players cannot easily "game the game." Players get caught up in the game and as a result, deal with the problems that come up much as they would in real life. Whether a player gives up in frustration after encountering an obstacle or comes up with an out-of-the-box solution, you can see how they will perform on the job.

In sports, teams practice their skills over and over to deal with every conceivable scenario: what you practice is what you will do under pressure. Businesses rarely have the luxury of rehearsal. Serious gaming enables businesses to practice and hone skills before the critical situation in which they are needed. Employees also have the opportunity to experiment and make mistakes in an environment in which there are no financial consequences to the business. Employees who need additional skill training can be identified before they fail on the job. Employees who demonstrate significant aptitude in unexpected skills can be further developed so that the company and the employee can fully benefit from their talents.

Most roleplaying exercises used today are too narrowly focused, allowing people to optimize their behavior, or they attempt to deny the effects emotion and ego have in decision making.

They are the gaming equivalent of "Fun with Dick and Jane." Unfortunately, perfect scenarios rarely occur in real life. For example, most pandemic flu exercises involve participants sitting calmly around a table discussing optimal strategies. There is no sense of personal risk or danger, and, hence, it is impossible to tell what behaviors would emerge under pressure. The game must provide enough depth to allow natural behaviors to emerge: in a serious, pandemic flu exercise I conducted in Washington DC in 2006, participants could "catch" the flu and be eliminated from the exercise. This triggered a much greater degree of emotional involvement, with behaviors ranging from panic to denial. As one doctor put it, "We do all sorts of disaster simulations, but we've never done one where we got sick."

Finally, once the game is over, it's a good idea to debrief the players. Explore their decisions, and the reasons they made them. Understand how the problems appeared from their perspectives, and help them see alternate ways of looking at those problems. Explore with them the consequences of their actions, both expected and unexpected. A key lesson that frequently arises is the realization that we all the star of our own stories, and we are all the bit players in someone else's story. As leaders, what can be done to elevate the bit players in our stories?

This article is based on the author's book chapter "Reality From Fantasy: Using Predictive Scenarios to Explore Ethical Dilemmas," appearing in "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play (Vol I)," edited by Karen Schrier and David Gibson.

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