

In praise of tabletop games: Part 1

By Philip Minchin



Biography

As well as 17 years in libraries, Philip Minchin has worked as a historian, editor, publisher, film and theatre producer, and in international human rights campaigning and national NGO governance. He brought [International Games Day \(now Week\)](#) to Australia in 2011, and ran the global event in 2013 and 2014 before becoming a proud dad and refocusing on his breadwinner/playmate responsibilities (though he remains involved globally). His initiatives to systemically support the library sector to make the most of games and play include:

- *highly rated training that offers strategic understanding plus hands-on experience and tools;*
- *working with international vendors to bring Windows and Android game e-lending to Australia; and*
- *sourcing tabletop games for libraries at a significant discount on retail.*

Phil also works to help libraries better engage with the networked world, including crowdsourcing tools and information literacy.

You can read more at his site, philipminchin.com

Introduction

Our understanding of educational technique and the nature of learning has transformed radically over the past century. We have moved steadily away from didactic models of pedagogy in light of our growing recognition that, beyond the specific facts and techniques that can be imparted through drills and rote learning, we need to instil both a set of baseline learning skills — research and comprehension, critical and analytic reasoning, creativity — and, just as importantly, a set of values and attitudes that make learning a lifelong pleasure rather than a threshold to be crossed and forgotten.

As part of this shift, educators are overcoming the longstanding and deeply erroneous belief that play is trivial, childish and inherently antithetical to learning, focus, seriousness and work. Increasingly, teachers are using playful techniques in the classroom and reaping the rewards of better engagement and attention, followed by more profound learning.

But we still have a tendency to assume that games only do any meaningful teaching when they are explicitly conceived of and created with a clear didactic goal in mind. We create trivia games to incentivise mastery of facts; counting games to teach numeracy;

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at best, simulation games to teach the operation of particular, 'educationally valid' systems such as ecologies, economies, geopolitics, the Underground Railroad, or other such worthy topics. And to be clear, to the extent that they work well, these are all valuable and worthwhile applications of games which can provide superior results to other modes of teaching.

However, just as reading quality fiction has tremendous inherent benefits independent of the specific content, games without any reference whatsoever to traditional topics of learning can teach vitally important lessons and skills. Insisting on seeing games only as delivery systems for legacy school-matter, rather than creating opportunities for learning in and of themselves, drastically limits — and in some cases outright eliminates — important learning opportunities.

Part 1 will explain a few key ideas that make sense of this assertion and Part 2 will give some practical examples of specific games and what they can be used to teach.

Multiple literacies

At the risk of sounding buzzwordy, I'm going to name some 'literacies' (meaning of course both the ability to comprehend and analyse within a given purview, a baseline knowledge of that purview, and the habit of bringing those skills and knowledge to bear) that are vitally important, that are

rarely if ever discussed, and that games are uniquely suited to teaching.

Psychological literacy is obviously related to emotional literacy, but rather than simply being about the capacity to read emotions, it's a broader concept encompassing understanding the mind as a whole. It incorporates awareness of neuroscience and the functioning of the brain, as well as more humanistic and empathic capacities that enable an integrated understanding of other people as independent minds. It's essential, not only for understanding others, but for awareness of one's own limitations and vulnerabilities to manipulation.

Social literacy is a similar concept, but applied to the dynamics of relationships *between* people rather than the forces operating *within* each of us. It's about awareness of where influence and power lie from moment to moment within a given group and being able to recognise the healthy and unhealthy patterns that can emerge — and how those broader emergent forces can shape and even constrain the choices of the individuals who comprise the group in question.

Relevant to both of these concepts is **systems literacy**. Both individual psyches and societies are systems; complex ones which can vary in extremely nuanced and subtle ways, but for all that, systems nonetheless. Just as importantly, they

inhabit and interact with other systems — economies and ecologies from the local to the global — which, despite their extraordinary variety, exhibit common elements and functions which can be studied, named and understood.

All of these terms, while not as widely used as they should be (especially in educational circles!), are not entirely novel. There is a fourth literacy that, to the best of my knowledge and various search engines' ability to search for phrases, has not been proposed elsewhere, and that is *procedural* literacy.

Procedural literacy

The term has been used before, though infrequently, by the eminent scholar of electronic interactivity, Ian Bogost, to denote the ability to analyse what he terms 'procedural rhetoric': computer code and the resulting interactions. However, despite my deep respect for Bogost and his work analysing video games and other interactive media, I would argue that this is essentially what is meant by the more widely used term 'digital literacy', or 'coding literacy' for the aspects which refer specifically to computer code.

Further, while 'procedure' is absolutely a term relevant to programming, I would argue that to the broader population it more commonly refers to a set of instructions governing *human* behaviour, often where there are conflicting priorities, decisions to be made, or other uncertain outcomes. 'Policies and procedures' are familiar to anyone who has worked in or had to deal with a large organisation: policy outlines the principles that govern a given situation, and procedure details the practical steps to be taken by those involved.

Procedural literacy as I define it requires both the ability to understand and observe procedure, and awareness of existing procedure, from things as simple as queues and taking turns, through levels of sophistication from 'the person who cuts the cake is last to choose their slice' to annual general meeting protocols and electoral voting rules, all the way to legal codes. Being equipped with a range of tools for collating information, resolving disputes and navigating power structures is an incredibly useful life skill, and overdue for its own terminology.

Procedural literacy, therefore, draws on all three literacies previously mentioned, while still constituting its own distinct skill set. It focuses on systems regulating the behaviour of multiple individuals in a single situation. It differs from social literacy in its focus on the operation of explicit or at least established rules, whereas social literacy is more about the more fluid qualities of relationships between people.

For instance, in a Parliamentary sitting, the procedurally literate person might 'read' the laws and rules governing who speaks what and when, and how those things are interpreted and applied in practice, where the socially literate person might focus on how power and focus shift around the room and the effects on various groups within the Parliament or the mood of the chamber as a whole of particular moments. Clearly these things are closely interrelated, but equally clearly, they are distinct: the same community operating under different rules (or the same rules as applied to and interpreted by different communities) can produce radically different outcomes.

Literacies and tabletop games

The relevance of tabletop games to these literacies is, I hope, obvious, but in brief:

- **Psychological literacy** is fostered by games that reward accurate assessment of the intentions and knowledge of one or more other players. Games do this to a degree matched only by the finest character-based literature, and with more of the immediate and direct feedback that best fosters learning.
- **Social literacy** is developed in any game, but more richly the greater the number of players. What's more, every game has an implicit or explicit social contract governing its play, and these contracts are themselves becoming an area of experimentation and innovation among game designers.
- **Systems literacy** is cultivated by exposure to any rule set that specifies interactions, causes and effects, a description applicable to all games and simulations. As with literature, there is exponential value in 'playing widely' in the same sense that one might 'read widely'.
- As tabletop games are nothing if not rule sets governing human interaction, **procedural literacy** is profoundly applicable to their play. The existence of the 'rules lawyer' archetype among gamer communities (essentially, a person who seeks to exploit minutiae of games rules for advantage the way lawyers, especially in highly adversarial systems such as ours and the USA's, seek to exploit minutiae of law) attests to both the ways in which tabletop games develop procedural literacy, and its exceptional usefulness in the wider world.

In addition to examining these various literacies, there is one more key point I would like to emphasise: that our common misconception about play, that it is somehow antithetical to learning, is entirely wrong.

Play as learning

In the early 20th century, one of the founding figures of cultural history, Johan Huizinga, wrote *Homo ludens: a history of the play element in culture*. This book was the first to describe how play creates a 'magic circle', which is simultaneously within but somehow apart from the broader reality, with its own laws and systems. Huizinga's thesis is that play is one of the core elements of human nature and is present in all aspects of culture — not only high culture such as the arts, but profoundly serious culture such as courts and parliaments, which also have their own magic circles of rules, customs, precedents and arbitrary meanings. In other words, to Huizinga, the capacity to play (*ludere*) is as much the distinguishing characteristic of humanity as the capacity to learn (*sapere*).

This conclusion is less controversial when you learn that scientists, education researchers and game designers have all converged on the conclusion that play is learning in some vitally important ways.

Mammalian biologists call play 'training for the unexpected' and describe how rats raised under regimes that punish them for playing become so unable to adapt to stress in resilient ways that they literally die rather than cope. Resilience aside, the connection between playful seeing-what-happens and the more rigorous trial-and-error of the scientific method is readily apparent with a moment's thought, as evidenced by the strong correlation between playfulness and intelligence in the animal kingdom.

Furthermore, both clinical education practice and only-recently-possible neuroscientific observations affirm that, to quote Diane Ackerman in *Deep Play*, '[p]lay is the brain's favourite way of learning'. It appears that genuine fun, when not had at anyone else's expense (which is instead about the neurochemical rewards for asserting pack status), is not an arbitrary distraction, but rather the mental equivalent of the endorphin reward the brain gives us for physical exercise. The *five-year* delay in the onset of degenerative brain diseases such as Alzheimer's that has been found among those who regularly challenge themselves with games and puzzles attests to the concrete health benefits of such exercise. Seen in this light, play is the brain's equivalent of dancing.

This idea that play=learning has also been observed from the play end of the equation. Legendary game designer Raph Koster wrote *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, in which he also contended that the essence of fun is learning. (He then urged his fellow creators to consider what was being learned from their work — but the same concerns are true of any art form, including literature.)

All in all, it seems clear that the playful arts, far from being something to banish from the library, are something to carefully and intelligently curate in order to cultivate key forms of learning — just as we do literature, and increasingly other media such as sequential art, movies and so on.

Games in the school library

So, to sum up: historically, we have associated play with childishness and frivolity, and treated it as something to be contained, discharged like a build-up of static electricity, or at best co-opted

and subordinated to more traditionally educational goals. What the evidence shows instead is that play is a primal human drive strongly linked to learning (and to many other positive characteristics – see v.gd/pmplay for more information).

What makes the playful arts, particularly tabletop games, especially suited to the library is the fact that libraries have always had an ethos of *self-directed* learning; and play, in order to be genuine play rather than enactment of an external script, needs to be self-directed. And, of course, the library is where we come to share culture — and tabletop games are a form of culture that HAS to be shared in order to be experienced.

It doesn't hurt that tabletop games are undergoing a massive resurgence in popularity, especially among screen-saturated young people! This is one of those cases where the smart thing, the right thing, and the strategic thing all overlap — a major opportunity if we can seize it.

In part 2 of this article, we will apply all this theory with some concrete examples of games you might use and ways in which you might use them. In the meantime, feel free to contact the author via his website, philipminchin.com.