

FORUM *for CORRESPONDENCE* and *CONTACT*

An Instrument for Human Dialogue on Important Contemporary Issues and Problems and on the Future of Humanity

Volume 15, Number 2

June, 1985

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 THE GAME OF GAMES: TRANSCENDING OUR TRIBALISM AS A STEP TOWARD WORLD PEACE

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The following contribution appeared in the March, 1985, issue of THE OPEN MIND.

There are many factors that determine whether groups and nations are at peace with one another: political, economic, religious, ideological, historical, etc. To progress towards world peace, we need to work on all these fronts. This article is about working on a basic psychological front that strongly affects all these other factors, usually in a hidden way. This factor has been too neglected.

This article is also a call for help to devise a training game (or games), The Game of Games, a game designed to help people learn to transcend the blindnesses and limitations of their native culture. As people master this, they will be more able to genuinely understand, negotiate and cooperate with people of other groups and nations from the ground of our basic humanity, instead of from the biases of our conflicting "tribal" loyalties.

We are social animals. From the core of our being we want to belong, to feel accepted in a larger group. The main group is the culture we are born into. "Cultural" is the appropriate anthropological term, but it is not an emotionally useful term for this discussion: it is too easy to contrast us "cultured" folks with those "savages." I'll use "tribe," with its usual connotations, to remind us how limited and primitive we are under our "tribal" veneer.

Any tribe, including our own, is a group which only knows about parts of our total potential as human beings. Through ignorance or prejudice, important parts of our humanity may be rejected or suppressed in our (or any) particular tribe. Any tribe also has very specialized, particularized, and somewhat arbitrary ways of looking at the world. These have been reasonably viable ways of getting along, by definition, or the tribe wouldn't have survived in the real world.

The tragedy with these particularistic, tribal ways of seeing reality is that they are not consciously recognized as particularistic and semi-arbitrary. They are automatically and unconsciously thought of as right, as the obvious, normal way of doing things. This automatically makes "foreigners" wrong.

It is hard for us to recognize how deep and pervasive the semi-arbitrary and limited conditionings of our tribe are. Here's one way: If you take a vacation in a foreign country now, you do it as a capable adult, full of knowledge about the world and with confidence in yourself. You can see the natives of the foreign country do many "strange" things, like saying "Guten Tag!" instead of "Good Morning!" or driving on the left side of the road instead of the right side. As a competent adult you realize that the rules for doing these sorts of things are basically arbitrary: we could just as well say "Guten Tag!" in our tribe or drive on the left.

When you were an infant, though, coming to live in your particular tribe, you had no knowledge of the world, no confidence in yourself, no reasoning ability. You absolutely depended on your parents for comfort and survival; and, in learning about your tribe through them, you took their (tribally conditioned) actions as absolute. They weren't the quaint and arbitrary ways the natives acted in the funny tribe you were visiting; they were the way things were done. We don't remember our early conditioning now; but it laid down extremely persistent psychological patterns in our minds that affect our thoughts, feelings and actions today.

We can no longer afford the luxury of blind acceptance of our own tribe's limited world view. When it's "them" versus "us" and our tribe is "obviously right," it's always tempting to take a chance and grab and strike. Our tribe and the other tribes aren't limited to clubs and spears anymore, though we have weapons that can destroy all human life on earth. The ensuing nuclear winter will destroy those not immediately killed in the hot part of the war, and most life on earth. We must transcend the tribal assumptions and conditionings that automatically polarize perception of our actions in terms of "them" and "us."

SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Here's a specific example of the

pernicious effects of unconscious, conditioned tribal limitations. We are not very good in negotiating with the Soviets, even though many of us on both sides share the goal of not wanting to destroy the world. We blame the Soviets; they blame us.

Certainly both sides do real things (military, political, etc.) that deserve blame and hamper negotiations, but let's add in the fact that we have a communication problem between two tribes who implicitly and explicitly perceive the world in different ways.

Robert Bathurst, an adjunct professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, has studied the Soviet-American communication problem and cast important light on it by bringing in a dimension of tribalism that anthropologist Edward Hall called context. In an interview in the January 1985 Esalen catalog, Bathurst points out that the Soviets are a high-context tribe: particular issues are not seen in isolation but in their relation to many past issues, other current issues, and many potential future issues. Americans, in contrast, are a low-context tribe. We have an attitude of "Let's isolate and fix this particular problem, don't worry about the past, and we'll fix the future problems when they arise."

So we try to talk with the Soviets about, say, a trade problem; and the Soviets keep relating it to something that happened during the Second World War. We think the Soviets are being irrelevant, deliberately avoiding the issue and confusing it, and stupid and hostile: don't they see we could work out an equitable arrangement about trading some wheat for oil? That war was 40 years ago, for God's sake!

The Soviets, from their tribal perspective, find us incredibly naive: We can't or won't see the obvious relations between things. If we won't admit to what is obvious, from their point of view, that probably means we are stupid and/or deliberately lying because we have hidden motives behind our actions! And on and on. The problem doesn't get solved, which builds more suspicion and hostility for the future.

TRANSCENDING TRIBALISM

We could deal much more effectively and more lovingly with people of other tribes if, in all our dealings, we were

constantly aware of all the assumptions, attitudes, biases and blindnesses that we had unwittingly picked up in the course of being conditioned to be "normal" for our tribe, and then tested them and put them aside when they weren't adaptive.

It's easy to make an intellectual commitment to do that, of course; but much of our conditioning lies outside consciousness and/or is connected up with our emotions in ways that make it difficult to get at.

We have psychological and spiritual growth techniques today that can help a lot if you want to transcend your tribe and find your basic humanity behind that conditioning. The problem is that these methods are long, arduous, don't always work and work much better at the individual level than the group level. We have to keep developing these individual approaches--the more transcendent individuals on the planet the better--but we need something that can help us transcend our tribal limits much faster and on a mass scale.

Nobody likes to hear that he or she is a limited and biased person, even if it's important to our mutual survival to know that. And we prefer to have fun rather than work hard. Suppose we had a game that helped people transcend the views of their particular tribe, something that was fun to play, with the learning about transcendence coming as part of the fun? Thus, this proposal to develop a training procedure and game, The Game of Games.

THE GAME OF GAMES

The basic idea in The Game of Games is that you and others learn to play as if you were a certain kind of tribe. To play well, you must learn that tribe's ways of thinking, feeling, acting and perceiving. As you get good at playing the game, having taken roles in a variety of tribes, you can start to wonder, "If we can play the life game from many different tribal perspectives, what's so absolute about my native tribe's perspective? What's the fundamental human perspective behind all these tribal perspectives?"

The Game of Games is far from being worked out and operationalized, but here are my and my wife's basic ideas to date.

Tribal Teams:

In The Games of Games, you and sever-

al others would play as a team, playing with/against/for other teams of several individuals each, and with each team working toward several goals.

Each team would be called a Tribe (better term possible?) and would be randomly assigned a set of attitudes, values, roles, perceptions and worldviews corresponding to some known human tribe. Thus, there might be a Japanese Tribe Team, an Iraqi Tribe Team, a German Tribe Team, an Australian Aborigine Tribe Team, etc. All the cultures of the world can be drawn on as potential team identities.

To avoid our preconceptions and existing tribal biases about what identifiable cultures are like ("Everybody knows Xians are pushy!"), the Tribal Team would be given some neutral name (number 12, Blue Team, etc.).

Briefing the Tribal Team Members:

Tribal Team members would get background material to read and refer to about what their Tribal Team is like.

For example, you might be told that: (a) your tribe values group belonging much more than individualism; (b) naked aggression and violence are feared and shameful and must be avoided whenever possible; (c) indirect statements that give you time to feel out others' emotional positions are preferred to direct statements that you like or dislike something or are for or against it, as such direct statements might alienate you from your group; (d) initial reactions to aggression from others should be deflected if possible with polite, non-combative, indirect responses, but others in your tribe will understand and sympathize if you finally reach a breaking point and explode in a violent response; and (e) there are strong status differences in your tribe which must be respected, even while promoting the appearance that we are one, happy family. These happen to be characteristic of an important contemporary culture, but let's leave it unidentified.

While you and your teammates will know what values and views have been assigned to your Tribal Team, you won't be told what values and views have been assigned to the other Tribal Teams in The Games of Games. Naturally you will try to figure that out when play involves interaction with other Tribal Teams, and this will help the transcendence aim of the game. Or the game could be made more

complex by your Tribal Team being given stereotyped information about other Tribal teams that is only partly accurate.

To stimulate real life, each Tribal Team will have several categories of problems to deal with. These problems will be randomly selected at various times by the World Referee. Problems will fall in categories of Internal Tribal Problems, Inter-Tribal Competition and World/Humanity Problems.

Internal Tribal Problems:

Internal Tribal types of problems will involve the sorts of domestic problems all tribes must face, such as keeping various internal factions and groups happy, maintaining tribal survival and progress, upholding tribal norms and values, and internal tribal humanitarian activities (helping our kind of people). This would include political sorts of problems like the need or desire of a political group in power maintaining itself in power so it was in a position to cope with external problems or perhaps a needed revolution when the current tribal power structure isn't working effectively enough.

Inter-Tribal Competition:

Inter-tribal competition type problems would involve disputes over natural resources, trade, attempts to impose your tribe's values on another (military action or "missionary" work), possibly limited wars, territorial disputes, etc. The possibility of large-scale wars and total annihilation of life should be built into the structure of The Game of Games as part of its realism: an everybody loses outcome.

World/Humanity Problems:

World/Humanity problems would involve creating peace and discovering the basic humanity that makes us brothers and sisters, without homogenizing humanity and losing all the richness and value of cultural diversity the way a world dictatorship would.

Inter-Tribal problems and World/Humanity problems would draw different Tribal Teams into negotiations and/or confrontations. Now each team member has to try to be faithful (to a reasonable and effective, but not necessarily absolute degree) to the assigned values and views of this Tribal Team, as well as trying to

understand the values of the other Tribal Teams involved, as well as trying to transcend his or her individual tribal limits and discover World/Humanity values.

Like Life--Multiple Simultaneous Problems:

For realism, Tribal Teams would have several categories of problems to cope with simultaneously as the game developed. For example, a team might be involved in: (a) trying to maintain Tribal Team political power; while (b) averting a threat of war with some other aggressive Tribal Team; while (c) trying to minimize the adverse impact of their actions on the world as a whole. If Tribe W is threatening war; e.g., we could use our nonrenewable oil at a faster rate and manufacture more weapons, which might scare off Tribe W so we avoid the negative consequences of war. But in the long run our Tribal Team will have uselessly (?) depleted natural resources and imperiled future health through increased pollution.

What is the best course of action in terms of your Tribal Team's assigned values and characteristics, in terms of fundamental trans-tribal human values, etc., etc.? Trying to maximize success in the several categories of problems will help develop great skill. An obvious world/humanitarian solution to an Inter-Tribal Competition problem might exist, for example, but be so alien to your Tribal Team's values that proposing it directly would create a massive domestic crisis that might cost you your power base and so make it impossible for you to take any effective world/humanitarian steps in the future. How far do you compromise?

The Tribal Referees:

This is a general term for several very important aspects of The Game of Games. At a tribal level, a Tribal Referee must scrutinize the proposed actions of each Tribal Team to make sure they are consistent with the values and attitudes assigned to that Tribal Team. If you are in a macho tribe, for example, you can't take steps that would be seen as "weak" without paying a price in terms of domestic power. If you're in a Tribal Team that values group harmony, you can't take an action that makes you stand out as an individual without paying a price, etc. This helps the players on each team learn to think like someone of that tribe.

The World Model/Referee:

A World Model underlies The Game of

Games. It provides an ultimate refereeing action for actions at all problem levels, tribal, inter-tribal and world/humanity. The World Model/Referee would include things like limits on certain natural resources, so the Referee might, for example, announce a leap of global prices of some basic commodity as a result of actions by one or more Tribal Teams.

If basic and tribal human values are modeled on a worldwide scale, reactions to actions of one Tribal Team by other Tribal Teams must be considered by the World Model/Referee. The Referees' actions must be absolute in certain areas (for example, the food crop has been devastated by the Blue Tribal Team's trade embargo on fertilizers, X people must die of starvation and world food prices must rise by so much). In other areas, the World Model/Referee will have wide latitude and effects will follow primarily from the reactions of various Tribal Teams (example: the cost of producing TV shows has gone way up; one Tribal Team might be deeply affected by this, another not at all).

The design of the World Model/Referee is important. It must be as faithful as possible to the physical constraints of the real world we live in: contemporary work on global economic models will help here. It must also have basic, trans-tribal characteristics and inherent values of humanity built into it. The design of the World Model/Referee will be a learning experience in tribal transcendence in itself, especially when we insist that it be "realistic," not just airy fairy "humanitarian!" We will probably end up with a variety of World Model/Referees in different versions of The Game of Games. Indeed, as the game becomes well-developed, versions where you deliberately change some of the assumptions of the world model can be used to test the way our assumptions influence our realities.

Implementation of the Tribal Referees and World Model Referee:

An elegant solution to creating the Referees and World Model/Referee would be to embody The Game of Games in a computer program. The World Model/Referee is then the world model in the program, each Tribal Referee is a tribal model in the program, etc. All proposed Tribal Team actions (plays) would then be entered into the program and refereed consistently in terms of the World and the various Tribal models.

We already have some computer-based games where you have to role play a character different from yourself. This character gets assigned some simple qualities, such as various amounts of intelligence, strength, magical abilities, etc. Then you and other players, each with their own character, are thrown into various adventurous situations where you must both survive and advance toward goals, such as finding treasure. These games have become extremely fascinating for some players: they get absorbed in their characters, they identify with them and start thinking and feeling like their character would. Further, some of these games are designed so that cooperation with other players, rather than competition, increases your chance of survival and reward. And they are fun, which is important in getting people to play. The technical skill developed in creating these games will be extremely valuable in designing more elaborate versions of The Game of Games.

While a totally computerized Game of Games will allow for the most elaborate modeling, it is restricted to people in relatively affluent tribes. We also need simpler versions of The Game of Games that are not computer-based, though. A board game, with one or more players assigned the various Referee roles, would be much cheaper and so available for international distribution.

Note, too, the possibility that the mass media could make versions of The Game of Games available globally, just as they do the news! Plays between various Tribal Teams could be followed internationally just as sports teams are, with all the readers/viewers/spectators learning from the action.

Various versions of The Game of Games could be especially useful to various groups. Anthropologists, for example, might find it an excellent way to teach anthropology. It could be a training tool for diplomats or for business people who must work in another culture.

TRANSCENDENCE: THE ULTIMATE GOAL

It's fascinating to get involved in the mechanics of a project, but let's remember our goal. The ultimate aim of The Game of Games is to teach the players to question the implicit, automatic assumptions and values of their own native tribe and so start to transcend tribalism, per se. If you get good at playing from

the point of view of Tribal Team X, it may occur to you that there are alternative points of view about some things you and your fellow tribespeople take for granted. When you also get good at thinking and acting like someone from Tribal Team Y when you're on that team, you can further question the things taken for granted in your native tribe. By the time you've gotten good at playing on many Tribal Teams, perhaps you'll become a good inter-tribal relater/negotiator in the real world, more a global citizen than a tribal citizen.

To question the values of your tribe does not mean to automatically reject all these values. It means to see them as relative, as perhaps fallible and certainly changeable expressions of something more important than the quaint customs of a single tribe. Then you can join the spiritual search for our common humanity behind the many diverse expressions of it in various tribes.

WHO CAN HELP? YOU CAN HELP!

The Game of Games is not a small project that I and my friends can develop. It is a large-scale effort calling for help from many, many people. Certain people with special technical skills can obviously contribute: to mention just those that immediately come to mind are anthropologists, computer programmers, game designers (board and computer), economists, futurists, psychologists, psychiatrists, political scientists, economists, etc. Game players of all sorts can contribute suggestions, try out preliminary versions, etc. An organiza-

tion or organizations are needed to gather suggestions, accept financial donations, coordinate projects, etc. I am sure I haven't thought of many things that would be helpful, so I leave you with the question, "How can I help?"

If this idea catches on, it could result in a steadily growing international effort to develop The Game of Games. Such a project is far beyond my personal resources and skills. I am basically a solitary scholar without skills in organizing people and big projects or the free time and resources to do it. Before I really broadcast The Game of Games idea far and wide, I am hoping that one or more of you (or others you refer me to) will get excited enough about the possibilities of The Game of Games to say, "This is exciting! My organization (or a consortium of organizations) will take this on!"

I hope the next draft of this proposal will end with "Send suggestions, contributions, offers of help, etc., to the Game of Games Foundation, Box so and so, because enough people think this would help further world peace that The Games of Games Project is moving!" Meanwhile, if you know of key people who might be interested in making The Game of Games a reality, send me their addresses so I can send them a copy of this proposal. I'd also like to hear about any organizations that would like to organize a Game of Games project, coordinate suggestions and offers of help, etc. Drop me line at Box 371, El Cerrito, CA. 94530. Write "Game of Games" on the lower left corner of the envelope so it won't get confused with regular subscription mail.

