Introducing *Cool School*: Where Peace Rules and Conflict Resolution can be Fun

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**ABSTRACT**

The need to play is primeval in human beings, at least as strong as the urge to fight. While the larger gaming community has traditionally focused on the fairly lucrative potential of exploiting the urge to fight in the form of violent and destructive war games, the “Serious Games” segment has become aware of the power of applying this technology “beyond entertainment” to advance social good. So far most of this work has focused on the areas of civics, health, education and NGO policy advocacy. Relatively little has been explored in the crucial domain of conflict resolution, especially as it pertains to promoting positive social skills in childhood. The authors seek to address this important need by offering a first empirical analysis of the impact that can be had from a new digital game designed to teach conflict resolution to children: Cool School: Where Peace Rules. This enjoyable interactive PC based game has already furnished visible and inspiring evidence of just how games can help children learn not to fight, but rather to negotiate, compromise and consider other perspectives, even at an early age. They hope to inspire further research and reflection in this area, as well as wider distribution of this particular new game.

Keywords: Child Development, Conflict Resolution, Gaming, Negotiation, Schools

**INTRODUCTION**

“But we know very well that one horse runs faster than another.” - the Shah of Persia HL p. 39, 3rd Century B.C.

Babies cry when they are born. But fairly soon, they also quite naturally crow with pleasure. Certainly, we are all driven by existential needs for food shelter, warmth and comfort. But somehow, at a very deep level, we also desperately want to play.

To put it more academically: the last two decades have revealed the biological basis for a social predisposition in humans and many
non-human animal species (Aureli & de Waal, 2000). Rather than being solely focused on the need for nourishment and safe environments, the desire to engage in positive social exchanges, and particularly playful ones, has been well demonstrated empirically (Biben & Suomi, 1992).

However it is phrased, play is a primordial and universal human requirement, a fundamental impulse shared not only by all people, but by all higher animals. It is an integral part of our very nature. Even more than homo sapiens or homo oeconomicus, we are first of all homo ludens: creatures that play. The institution of games and play is older than civilization itself. Historical records describe competitive game playing dating back at least to Assyrian game boards in 8,000 B.C., and we have been playing ever since, in all manner of games, all the way to the 2010 World Cup, passionately viewed and followed by an estimated 3 billion people. Indeed, without play, civilization is hardly possible. For as the great play theorist Huizinga (1949) reminds us, civilization presupposes limitation and mastery of the self. It starts with our ability to create and freely accept certain bounds to delimit our actions, a space for play. And it is in that space that we develop the rules and rituals that define as a culture. We create games, those great amplifiers of the imagination.

All higher animals play, but only humans laugh. And only humans codify rules. For we not only play, but we know that we play, and we know that it is irrational. For play is, technically seen, completely unnecesarily. It has absolutely nothing to do with utility, duty and truth. It just feels good.

Through play, and use of the vehicle of metaphor, we create a second and more poetic world for ourselves. Play enchants us. It offers us a glimpse of another dimension of human experience, one that is governed by delight, wonder and awe – what psychologists call “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; McGonigal, 2011). And we crave to taste that dimension just as much as we are bound to satisfy our more prosaic needs.

All of this is perhaps in tension with what Huizinga calls the “agonistic” impulse: the need to compete and strive, even to win against our peers. We get flow from immersion in beauty, but we also get it from the exertion of reaching for the prize. Left untrammeled, this need can easily draw us into war and violence. Tempered by play, it becomes a game, with its energy channeled more benignly. In a game, we can learn to use naturally motivated cooperative skills to resolve conflicts with non-aggressive means; as a species advances, the ability to use more complex negotiation skills creates positive social interactions and healthy developmental outcomes.

And herein lies an opportunity.

WHAT IS A GAME?

Various play scholars have defined “games” in different terms, perhaps most significantly Wittgenstein, but also Huizinga (1949), Sutton Smith (2001), Suits (2005), and Berne and Karse (1996). Games can be physical, mental, mathematical, musical, political, sociological or theatrical. They can be entertaining but also serious. They are played in almost any context, real or virtual. Some would say, with Shakespeare, that all of life is a game, and that we are all players, consciously or unconsciously assuming and shedding roles.

Certainly, games are played by children, but they are also, increasingly, engaged in by adults. Recent statistics show that 69% of all heads of households play computer and video games, and one out of four of these is over 50 (McGonigal, 2011). Perhaps most surprisingly, by their own admission, 61% of CEOs and CFOS take game breaks at work. Games engage us all.

What is a game? From modern video game philosopher McGonigal (2011) comes a definition along four elements. It is:

- **Engaged in voluntarily**, as we choose to step out of “real life” into a temporary sphere of activity all its own, with specific
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