

Playing Games Productively

BY JAMES J. KIRK

AS A TRAINER, NO doubt you have used games at one time or another to enliven your sessions and drive home a particular point in, say, high performance, cultural diversity, or teamwork. There is certainly no shortage of top-notch training games, and most can be purchased for less than \$600.

But even though games can breathe life into an otherwise humdrum training event, they shouldn't be used just for the sake of playing a game. Like other instructional strategies, a game should contribute to the desired learning outcomes. In selecting an appropriate game, you should ask several questions.

What is the purpose of the game? For example, if you want to apply certain team skills, then the game should give participants opportunities to receive feedback on and practice applying those skills.

Is the game conceptually sound? An instructional game should accurately and realistically present the concepts that it claims to teach. For example, a game that is designed to teach four stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, and performing) should present group behaviors and issues that characterize each of the four stages.

Is the game appropriate for the trainees? Typically, games require participants to have some knowledge of the game's content, some communication and elementary math skills, and some understanding of how games are played. For example, the game Blue Monday (see the Quick Game Reference on page 12) requires players to have excellent reading and writing skills. If participants don't have the requisite knowledge or skills for playing a particular game, they will want to quit long before the game is over.

Is the game appropriate for the facilitator? Games differ in sophistication. Complex games require a facilitator who is well-versed on the content of the game and in the art of game facilitation. For example, facilitators of the games Barnaga and Diversity Bingo



should understand and be sensitive to cultural diversity issues. They must also be able to facilitate emotionally charged group discussions.

Are there sufficient resources? In addition to the cost of the materials, games sometimes require a lot of space, computer equipment, or props. It's important to check whether such resources will be available when and where you want to play the game.

How long does it take? Games can take 10 minutes to several weeks to play. You have to know when and how long trainees will be available. You should also be prepared to justify spending the time it takes to play a game.

Are the materials high quality? A game should come with a facilitator's guide and other materials. The guide should have clear, detailed instructions on how to play the game and how to debrief participants. It should also alert you to behaviors that participants are likely to exhibit during game play and give suggestions for dealing with them.

What are the strong and weak points? Just as in purchasing new software or

a new training video, you should ask colleagues what kind of experiences they have had with a particular game—under what conditions and with which audiences. You should also get some ideas on how to prepare participants for playing the game and how to modify it for different needs, audiences, and circumstances.

Addressing those issues before purchasing a game can greatly increase the chance that playing it will be a fun and productive learning exercise. Two good references are *Info-line's Ten Great Games and How to Use Them* (#8411) and *Get Results From Simulation and Role Play* (#8412), published by the American Society for Training and Development. Those guides include basic concepts on facilitating games, simulations, and role plays—and ideas on how to achieve impressive results from gaming activities.

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QUICK GAME REFERENCE

Game	Barnaga	Blue Monday	Caribbean Island Survival II	Diversity Bingo	Flying Starship Factory	SubArctic Survival	Visit to an Alien Planet
Vendor	Intercultural Press Box 700 Yarmouth, ME 04096 207/846-5168	The Training Store 5 South Miller Road Harrisburg, PA 17109 800/222-9909	AVAIT 555 Briarwood Circle Drive Suite 140 Ann Arbor, MI 48108 800/421-5323	Jossey-Bass/ Pfeiffer & Company 2780 Circleport Drive Erlanger, KY 41018 800/274-4434	Block Petrella Weisbord 1009 Park Avenue Plainfield, NJ 07060 908/754-5100	SubArctic Survival Human Synergetics 3981 Plymouth Road C-8020 Plymouth, MI 48170 800/622-7584	Visit to an Alien Planet Educational Simulations Box 276 Oceanside, OR 97134 503/842-7247
Price	\$22.95	\$199.95 (package)	\$24.45	\$99.95	\$700 (kit of 20)	\$225	\$15
Learning Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To raise awareness that people from different cultures have different ways of accomplishing everyday tasks. ▶ To recognize the necessity for cross-cultural group members to reconcile their differences in order to function effectively as a team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To manage time more effectively. ▶ To solve problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To understand what it means to function as a team. ▶ To raise awareness of how people's behaviors change in a team environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To raise awareness of different aspects of diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To learn how to redesign the workplace using a systems approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To learn decision making and problem solving. ▶ To understand group dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ To understand values among groups of different genders, ages, religions, and ethnic backgrounds.
Target Audience	age 12 and up	managers and supervisors	any group interested in team building	any group interested in diversity issues	any level employees	work teams	age 12 and up
Playing Time	45-90 minutes	60-90 minutes	90-150 minutes	10-15 minutes	6-12 hours	90-150 minutes	30-46 minutes
Number of Players	nine or more	2-15	six or more	15-40	12-60	five or more	9-40
Materials Included	an instruction manual, facilitator's guide sheets, and copies of all materials needed to play the game	instructions, a daily activity list, in-basket items, and discussion questions	instructions, a scenario, a regional map, an action alternatives checklist, and a salvageable-items checklist	a trainer's manual, 50 bingo cards	a leader guide, workbooks, and performance materials	leader and observer guides, participant booklets, and video enhancement tapes	a scenario, a candidate information form, a scoring form, and discussion questions
Strengths	Reveals hidden cultural differences and breakdowns in communication. Easy to play and facilitate. Excellent manual.	Game decisions are typical of daily management. In-basket exercises are realistic.	Fun to play, highly interactive. Good catalyst for looking at how people work together.	Fun, fast-paced, easy to play, and highly interactive. Can also be used as an icebreaker.	Is fun and easy to play, with excellent materials.	Attractive, well-written materials. Stimulates discussion.	Players learn what they value in others and how they determine what is of value. Excellent questions.
Potential Limitations	With large audiences, the game can take more than an hour to play. Some participants may resist using the "playing cards."	Not appropriate for managers or supervisors who don't have an assistant. Sold as part of Session Builders Series 100 package.	The facilitator's handbook is short on specifics. Knowledge of the Caribbean is helpful.	Assertive players tend to win more frequently than nonassertive players.	Expensive and requires a lot of time.	May not be appealing to "indoor types."	Some of the rules need further clarification. Scoring procedures appear to favor informed teams.