

The Long View  
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A self-confessed “resident mad scientist” at the Thiagi Group, which uses games and simulations to improve human performance, Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan has conducted training in areas such as creativity, teamwork, diversity, and organizational learning. He is a consultant, author of 40 books, and creator of more than 120 games.

*You used to teach physics in India. How did you think of using games in training?*

One day, as I was teaching internal combustion to a high school class, I noticed that the majority of students were either sleeping or talking to each other. I told them we were going to have a contest: Their job was to go out to the streets and bring me a carburetor from a parked car.

When they came back, we took the carburetor apart. Part two of the exercise, of course, involved them putting the carburetor back into the car without getting caught by the police.

That was an epiphany for me; that’s when I realized the power of hands-on experience. The students were learning, because there was a new level of interest, motivation, and competition.

*Have you found there to be companies or cultures where games simply are not accepted?*

While there are cultural differences, here is an interesting fact: All human beings play games. There is no culture in the world that doesn’t play games, other than some middle-managers in Chicago who think it’s beneath their dignity. If we look at zoo-anthropology, we see that the more developed the animal, the more they play games. Cockroaches don’t play games; chimpanzees do—for example, they like irritating zookeepers just for the fun of it.

I have played games in 25 different countries and haven’t had any difficulty as long as I respect the audience. Having said that, let me give you a horror story of when I and my wife first arrived in the United States. We were invited to a neighborhood party in a trailer court. When we got there, I thought it was an orgy: A bunch of scantily clad men and women were writhing on a small carpet. It was then explained to me that this was a game called *Twister*.

This was day two of our life in the United States, and it was a major culture shock for us. Now, I would not play *Twister* in the Middle-Eastern or Asian countries. But the differences between cultural taboos are usually very easy to figure out. And, even in the United States, there are big cultural gaps between different people, such as salespeople and engineers.

The key is to be credible and offer a rationale for using games. And besides, in training I prefer not to call them games; I call them nonelectronic group process support systems. As long as they are not stupid or arrogant, you can play with any culture and any age group anywhere in the world.

*How do you think traditional games will fare in the face of growing competition from computer games?*

The problem with people who claim that computer games are going to take over the whole world is that they use games very loosely to mean anything and everything. To me, learning is learning whether it's e-learning or classroom learning. A game is a game, whether it's online or on a tabletop. The key element in a game is whether it makes people think or not.

One of the things I use computers for is score keeping and randomization to assist playing classroom games. So there are many ways of blending computer games with tabletop games.

Computer games can do certain things very well, but face-to-face interaction is wonderful for other reasons. For example, I don't think computer games will ever replace a bunch of people having a pajama party and playing monopoly all night long.

*What was your first job, and what lesson did you take away from it?*

I had two jobs: To augment my meager salary as a high school teacher, I was also a street corner magician. I sawed a woman in half, and she now lives in Calcutta and New Delhi. No, but really—I did card and coin tricks. I had a ball and the audience had a ball, and I never made any money. But I learned everything I know about training: How to motivate, think on your feet, and keep people's attention.

*What links do you still have to your native country?*

I am involved with an orphanage that my grandfather founded in the southeastern part of India. It is an Oliver Twist –type of boarding school, only hopefully without people being frightened to ask for more gruel. We feed, clothe, and educate orphan children. Once every couple of years I visit the place, play games with the children, and mess everything up. The teachers just wait for me to leave so they can straighten up the kids again.

The interesting thing was that last time I asked the children what they think is going to happen in training in 20 years time. One of the kids made a profound statement. He said, 'Twenty years from now, we can say for sure that you will be dead.' So you see, the new, computer game generation is just waiting for us, the current generation, to drop dead so they can finally play and do everything they want to.

*How do you play outside work?*

I am in a strange position where I can honestly say I have never worked for a living a single day of my life. I get absolutely confused as to when I'm working and when I'm playing because my job is to design games and make people laugh, while sneakily making them improve their performance. Having said that, I also write short stories and read a lot of murder mysteries. In other words, I am a virtual serial murderer.