"Everybody knows the problem: we need to be more innovative. Now we've got the solution: *Gamestorming*. This smart, fun, hands-on book will energize your brain and mobilize your creativity—and do it using stuff you already have in your office supply closet!"

—Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*

Game storming

A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers

Dave Gray
Sunni Brown
James Macanufo

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Gamestorming

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Gamestorming

by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo

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What Is a Game?

GAMES AND PLAY ARE NOT THE SAME THING.

Imagine a boy playing with a ball. He kicks the ball against a wall, and the ball bounces back to him. He stops the ball with his foot and kicks it again. By engaging in this kind of play, the boy learns to associate certain movements of his body with the movements of the ball in space. We could call this *associative play*.

Now imagine that the boy is waiting for a friend. The friend appears, and the two boys begin to walk down a sidewalk together, kicking the ball back and forth as they go. Now the play has gained a social dimension; one boy's actions suggest a response, and vice versa. You could think of this form of play as a kind of improvised conversation, where the two boys engage each other using the ball as a medium. This kind of play has no clear beginning or end; rather, it flows seamlessly from one state into another. We could call this *streaming play*.

Now imagine that the boys come to a small park, and that they become bored simply kicking the ball back and forth. One boy says to the other, "Let's take turns trying to hit that tree. You have to kick the ball from behind this line." The boy draws a line by dragging his heel through the dirt. "We'll take turns kicking the ball. Each time you hit the tree you get a point. First one to five wins." The other boy agrees and they begin to play. Now the play has become a game; a fundamentally different kind of play.

What makes a game different? We can break down this very simple game into some basic components that separate it from other kinds of play.

> **Game space:** To enter into a game is to enter another kind of space where the rules of ordinary life are temporarily suspended and replaced with the rules of the game. In effect, a game creates an alternative world, a model world. To enter a game space, the players must agree to abide by the rules of that space, and they must enter willingly. It's not a game if people are forced to play. This agreement among the players to temporarily suspend reality creates a safe place where the players can engage in behavior that might be risky, uncomfortable, or even rude in their normal lives. By agreeing to a set of rules (stay behind the line, take turns kicking the ball, etc.), the two boys enter a shared world. Without that agreement, the game would not be possible.

Boundaries: A game has boundaries in time and space. There is a time when a game begins—when the players enter the game space—and a time when they leave the game space, ending the game. The game space can be paused or activated by agreement of the players. We can imagine that the players agree to pause the game for lunch, or so that one of them can go to the bathroom. The game will usually have a spatial boundary, outside of which the rules do not apply. Imagine, for example, that spectators gather to observe the kicking contest. It's easy to see that they could not insert themselves between a player and the tree, or distract the players, without spoiling or at least changing the game.

Rules for interaction: Within the game space, players agree to abide by rules that define the way the game world operates. The game rules define the constraints of the game space, just as physical laws, like gravity, constrain the real world. According to the rules of the game world, a boy could no more kick the ball from the wrong side of the line than he could make a ball fall up. Of course, he could do this, but not without violating the game space—something we call cheating.

Artifacts: Most games employ physical artifacts; objects that hold information about the game, either intrinsically or by virtue of their position. The ball and the tree in our game are such objects. When the ball hits the tree a point is scored. That's information. Artifacts can be used to track progress and to maintain a picture of the game's current state. We can easily imagine, for example, that as each point is scored, the boys place a stone on the ground or make hash marks in the dirt to help them keep track of the score—another kind of information artifact. The players are also artifacts in the sense that their position can hold information about the state of a game. Compare the position of players on a sports field to the pieces on a chessboard.

Goal: Players must have a way to know when the game is over; an end state that they are all striving to attain, that is understood and agreed to by all players. Sometimes a game can be timed, as in many sports, such as football. In our case, a goal is met every time a player hits the tree with the ball, and the game ends when the first player reaches five points.

We can find these familiar elements in any game, whether it is chess, tennis, poker, ring-around-the-rosie, or the games you will find in this book.

The Evolution of the Game World

Every game is a world which evolves in stages, as follows: imagine the world, create the world, open the world, explore the world, and close the world. Here's how it works:
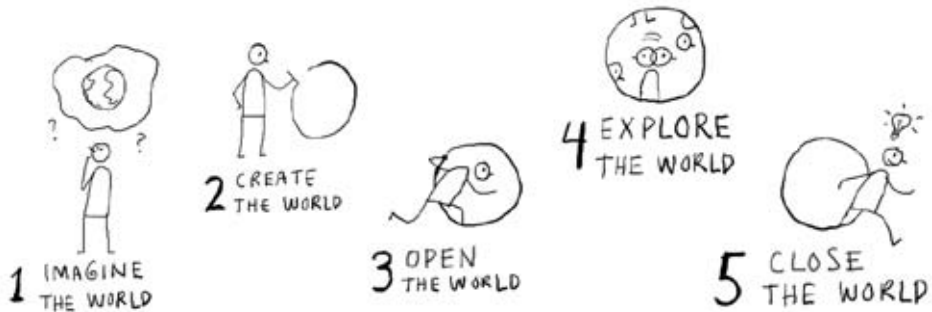
Imagine the world. Before the game can begin you must imagine a possible world; a temporary space, within which players can explore any set of ideas or possibilities.

Create the world. A game world is formed by giving it boundaries, rules, and artifacts. Boundaries are the spatial and temporal boundaries of the world; its beginning and end, and its edges. Rules are the laws that govern the world; artifacts are the things that populate the world.

Open the world. A game world can only be entered by agreement among the players. To agree, they must understand the game's boundaries, rules, artifacts; what they represent, how they operate, and so on.

Explore the world. Goals are the animating force that drives exploration; they provide a necessary tension between the initial condition of the world and some desired state. Goals can be defined in advance or by the players within the context of the game. Once players have entered the world they try to realize their goals within the constraints of the game world's system. They interact with artifacts, test ideas, try out various strategies, and adapt to changing conditions as the game progresses, in their drive to achieve their goals.

Close the world. A game is finished when the game's goals have been met. Although achieving a goal gives the players a sense of gratification and accomplishment, the goal is not really the point of the game so much as a kind of marker to ceremonially close the game space. The point of the game is the play itself, the exploration of an imaginary space that happens during the play, and the insights that come from that exploration.

Imagine the world, create the world, open the world, explore the world, and close the world. The first two stages are the game design, and the remaining three stages are the play.

You can see that a game, once designed, can be played an infinite number of times. So, if you're playing a predesigned game there will be only three stages: open the world, explore the world, and close the world.

Gamestorming is about creating game worlds specifically to explore and examine business challenges, to improve collaboration, and to generate novel insights about the way the world works and what kinds of possibilities we might find there. Game worlds are alternative realities—parallel universes that we can create and explore, limited only by our imagination. A game can be carefully designed in advance or put together in an instant, with found materials. A game can take 15 minutes or several days to complete. The number of possible games, like the number of possible worlds, is infinite. By imagining, creating, and exploring possible worlds, you will open the door to breakthrough thinking and real innovation.

The Game of Business

Let's begin by boiling the "game of business" down to its most basic components.

Business, like many other human activities, is built around goals. Goals are a way we move from A to B; from where we are to where we want to be. A goal sets up a tension between a current state A—an initial condition—and a targeted future state B—the goal. In between A and B is something we can call the challenge space; the ground we need to cover in order to get there.

A
•
Initial
Conditions

CHALLENGE
SPACE

B
•
Target
state
(goal)

In industrial work, we want to manage work for consistent, repeatable, predictable results. Industrial goals are best when they are specific and quantifiable. In such cases, we want to ensure that our goals are as clear and unambiguous as possible. The more specific and measurable the goal is, the better. When we have a clear, precise industrial goal, the best way to address the challenge space is with a business process—a series of steps that, if followed precisely, will create a chain of cause and effect that will lead consistently to the same result.

A
B
CLEAR,
UNAMBIGUOUS
GOAL

BUSINESS PROCESS
(A series of steps,
CAUSE AND EFFECT)
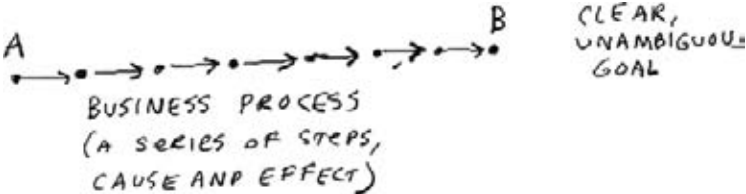
But in knowledge work we need to manage for creativity—in effect, we don't want predictability so much as breakthrough ideas, which are inherently unpredictable. In any creative endeavor, the goal is not to incrementally improve on the past but to generate something new.

New, by definition, means "not seen before." So, if a team wants to truly create, there is simply no way to precisely define the goal in advance, because there are too many unknowns. Embarking on this kind of project is akin to a voyage of discovery: like Columbus, you may begin your journey by searching for a route to India, but you might find something like America; completely different, but perhaps more valuable.

Fuzzy Goals

Like Columbus, in order to move toward an uncertain future, you need to set a course. But how do you set a course when the destination is unknown? This is where it becomes necessary to imagine a world; a future world that is different from our own. Somehow we need to imagine a world that we can't really fully conceive yet—a world that we can see only dimly, as if through a fog.

In knowledge work we need our goals to be fuzzy.

Gamestorming is an alternative to the traditional business process. In gamestorming, goals are not precise, and so the way we approach the challenge space cannot be designed in advance, nor can it be fully predicted.

While a business process creates a solid, secure chain of cause and effect, gamestorming creates something different: not a chain, but a framework for exploration, experimentation, and trial and error. The path to the goal is not clear, and the goal may in fact change.

CLEAR GOAL

FUZZY GOAL

PROCESS

GAME
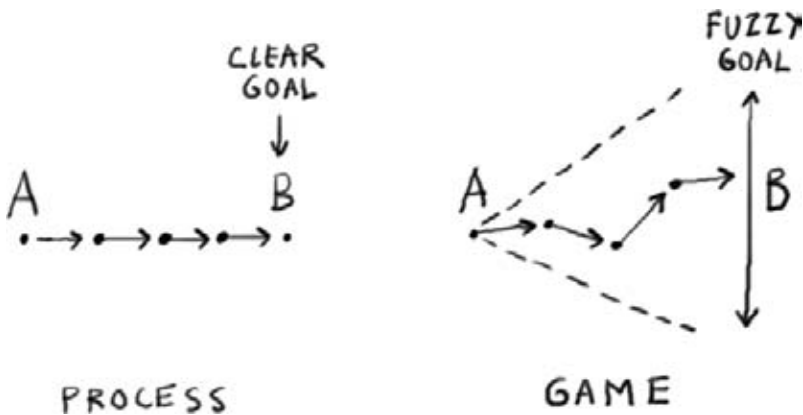
This is true at both a micro scale and a macro scale. To create a complex industrial product requires the close integration of many processes. When you string a bunch of processes together you will see a branching structure with many dependencies. As long as every step is followed precisely and nothing changes along the way, you will achieve your goal reliably and predictably every time. The management challenge is one of precision, accuracy, and consistency.

STRINGING TOGETHER PROCESSES
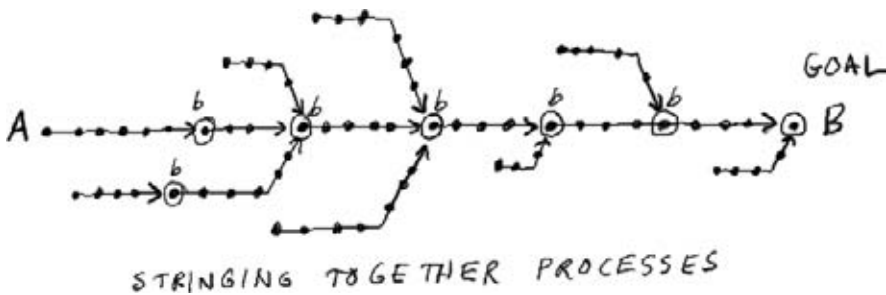
Managing creative work requires a different approach. Because the goal cannot be determined precisely in advance, a project must proceed based on intuition, hypotheses, and guesses. This kind of approach is very familiar in the world of the military, where ambiguous, uncertain, volatile environments are the norm.

We all know that the military uses games and simulations as a way to practice for war. But they also use something called a concept of operations, or CONOPS, to (1) create an overall picture of the system and the goals that they want to achieve, and (2) communicate that picture to the people who will work together to reach those goals. A concept of operations is a way to say, "Given what we know today, here is how we think this system works, and here is how we plan to approach it."

A concept of operations is a way to imagine a world.

This may seem like a big challenge, but think about our two boys playing ball: the world we create does not necessarily need to be complicated to be interesting and to help us move forward. Imagining a world can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it, depending on your goal, your situation, and the time you have available.

Unlike a large and complex process, which must be planned in advance, a concept of operations is under constant revision and adjustment based on what you learn as you go. So, yes, you need to have a goal, but since you really know very little about the challenge space, it's very likely that your goal will change as you try out ideas and learn more about what works and what doesn't.

In gamestorming, games are not links in a chain, so much as battles in a campaign.

STRINGING TOGETHER GAMES
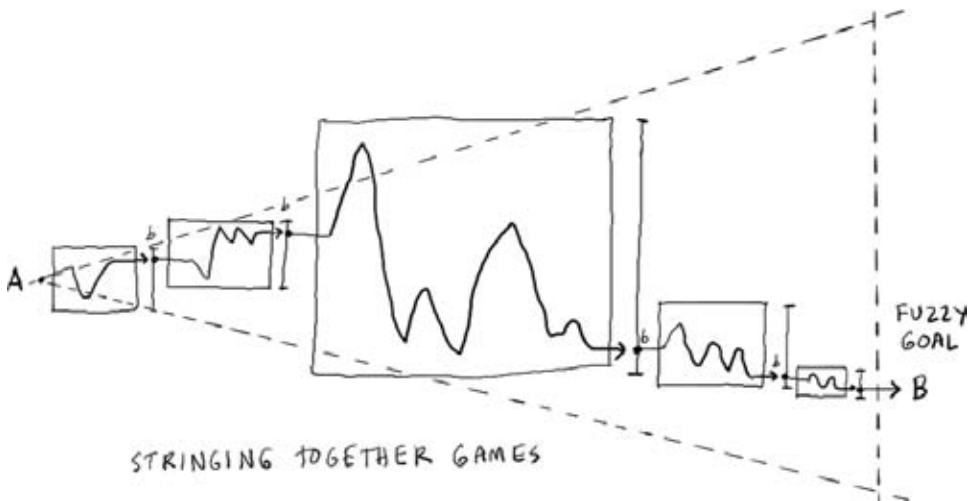
In a paper titled "Radical innovation: crossing boundaries with interdisciplinary teams," Cambridge researcher Alan Blackwell and colleagues identified fuzzy goals (they called it a pole-star vision) as an essential element of successful innovation. A fuzzy goal is one that "motivates the general direction of the work, without blinding the team to opportunities along the journey." One leader described his approach as "sideways management." Important factors identified by the Cambridge research team include the balance between focus and serendipity, and coordinating team goals and the goals of individual collaborators.

Fuzzy goals straddle the space between two contradictory criteria. At one end of the spectrum is the clear, specific, quantifiable goal, such as 1,000 units or $1,000. At the other end is the goal that is so vague as to be, in practice, impossible to achieve; for example, peace on Earth or a theory of everything. While these kinds of goals may be noble, and even theoretically achievable, they lack sufficient definition to focus the creative activity. Fuzzy goals must give a team a sense of direction and purpose while leaving team members free to follow their intuition.

What is the optimal level of fuzziness? To define a fuzzy goal you need a certain amount of ESP: fuzzy goals are Emotional, Sensory, and Progressive.

Emotional: Fuzzy goals must be aligned with people's passion and energy for the project. It's this passion and energy that gives creative projects their momentum; therefore, fuzzy goals must have a compelling emotional component.

Sensory: The more tangible you can make a goal, the easier it is to share it with others. Sketches and crude physical models help to bring form to ideas that might otherwise be too vague to grasp. You may be able to visualize the goal itself, or you may be able to visualize an effect of the goal, such as a customer experience. Either way, before a goal can be shared it needs to be made explicit in some way.

Progressive: Fuzzy goals are not static; they change over time. This is because, when you begin to move toward a fuzzy goal, you don't know what you don't know. The process of moving toward the goal is also a learning process, sometimes called *successive approximation*. As the team learns, the goals may change, so it's important to stop every once in awhile and look around. Fuzzy goals must be adjusted (and sometimes, completely changed) based on what you learn as you go.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FUZZY GOALS

MOVEMENT TOWARD FUZZY GOALS IS PROGRESSIVE

EMOTIONAL
PASSION GENERATES MOMENTUM

SENSORY
TANGIBLE ARTIFACTS MAKE IDEAS SHARABLE
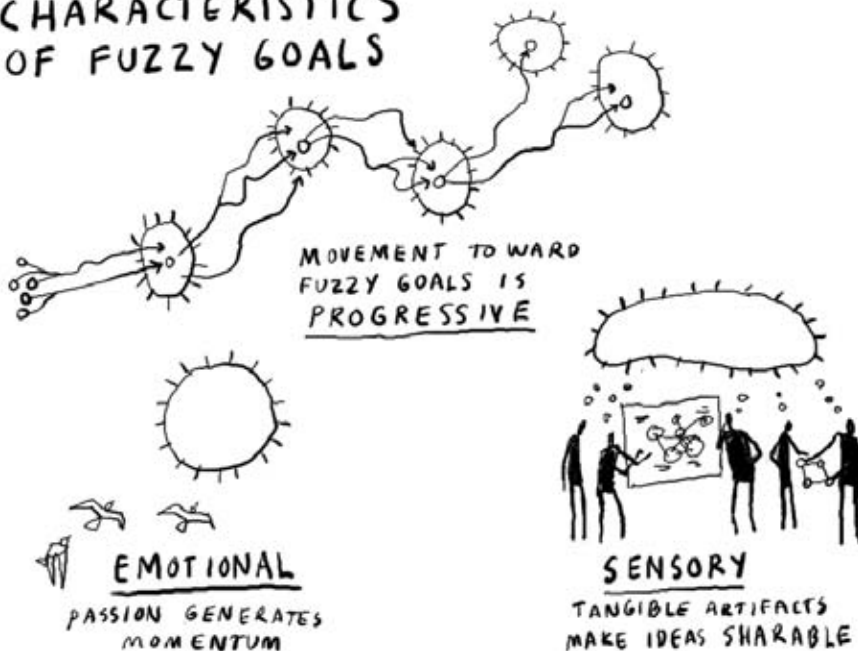
Innovative teams need to navigate ambiguous, uncertain, and often complex information spaces. What is unknown usually far outweighs what is known. In many ways it's a journey in the fog, where the case studies haven't been written yet, and there are no examples of where it's been done successfully before. Voyages of discovery involve greater risks and more failures along the way than other endeavors. But the rewards are worth it.

Game Design

If you want to get started with gamestorming right away, you can flip to the collection of games that begins with Chapter 5 and start making things happen in your workplace. But if you want to really master gamestorming, you'll need to learn how to design your own games, based on your goals and more specific to what you want to accomplish.

Let's start with this idea. A game has a shape. It looks something like a stubby pencil sharpened at both ends. The goal of the game is to get from A, the initial state, to B, the target state, or goal of the game. In between A and B you have the stubby pencil—that's the shape you need to fill in with your game design.

Target State: To design a game you begin with the end in mind: you need to know the goal of the game. What do you want to have accomplished by the end of the game? What does victory look like? What's the takeaway? That's the outcome of the game, the target state. I like to think of the target state in terms of some tangible thing, which can be anything from a prototype to a project plan or a list of ideas for further exploration. Remember, it helps if a goal is tangible; it gives people something meaningful to shoot for and gives them a sense of accomplishment when they have finished. And when they are done, they'll be able to look at something they created together.

Initial State: We also need to know what the initial state looks like. What do we know now? What don't we know? Who is on the team? What resources do we have available?
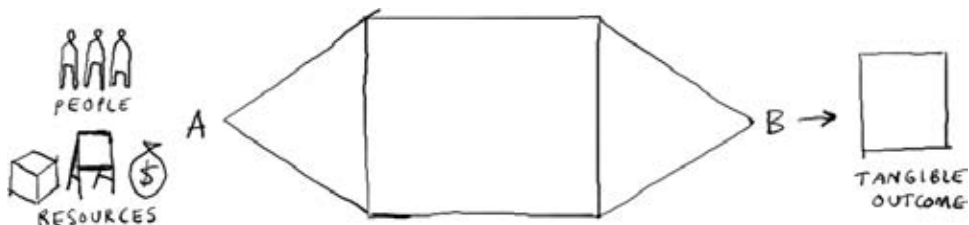
Once we understand the initial and target states as best we can (remember that many goals are fuzzy!), it's time to fill in the shape of the game. A game, like a good movie, unfolds in three acts.

The first act opens the world by setting the stage, introducing the players, and developing the themes, ideas, and information that will populate your world. In the second act, you will explore and experiment with the themes you develop in act one. In the third act, you will come to conclusions, make decisions, and plan for the actions that will serve as the inputs for the next thing that happens, whether it's another game or something else.
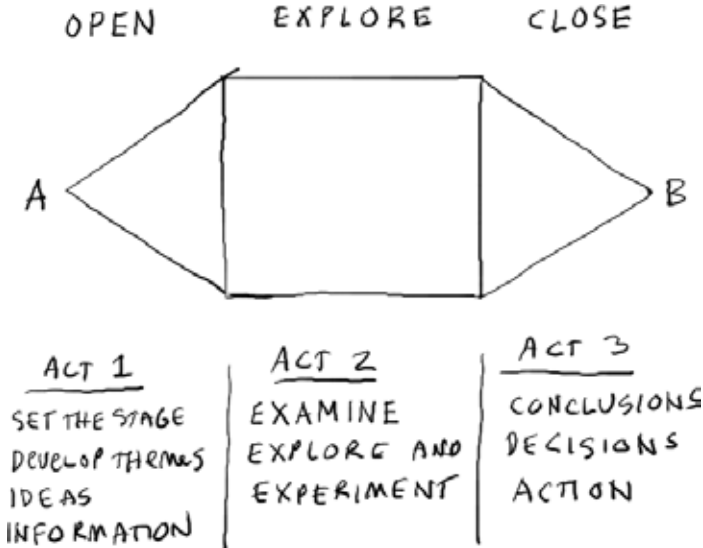
Each of the three stages of the game has a different purpose.

Opening: The first act is the opening act, and it's all about opening—opening people's minds, opening up possibilities. The opening act is about getting the people in the room, the cards on the table, the information and ideas flowing. You can think of the opening as a big bang, an explosion of ideas and opportunities.

The more ideas you can get out in the open, the more you will have to work with in the next stage. The opening is not the time for critical thinking or skepticism; it's the time for blue-sky thinking, brainstorming, energy, and optimism. The keyword for opening is "divergent": you want the widest possible spread of perspectives; you want to populate your world with as many and as diverse a set of ideas as you can.
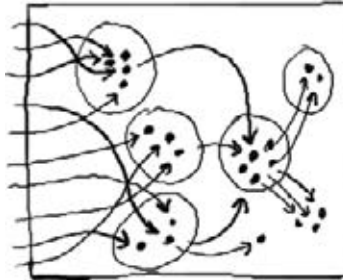
EXPLORING
(EMERGENT)

Exploring: Once you have the energy and the ideas flowing into the room, you need to do some exploration and experimentation. This is where the rubber hits the road, where you look for patterns and analogies, try to see old things in new ways, sift and sort through ideas, build and test things, and so on. The keyword for the exploring stage is "emergent": you want to create the conditions that will allow unexpected, surprising, and delightful things to emerge.
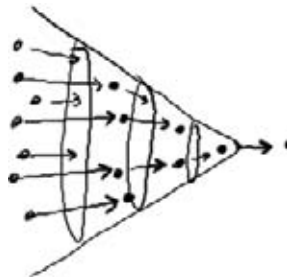
CLOSING
(CONVERGENT)

Closing: In the final act you want to move toward conclusions—toward decisions, actions, and next steps. This is the time to assess ideas, to look at them with a critical or realistic eye. You can't do everything or pursue every opportunity. Which of them are the most promising? Where do you want to invest your time and energy? The keyword for the closing act is "convergent": you want to narrow the field in order to select the most promising things for whatever comes next.

When you are designing an exercise or workshop, you want to think like a composer, orchestrating the activities to achieve the right harmony between creativity, reflection, thinking, energy, and decision making. There is no single right way to design a game. Every company, and every country, has its own unique culture, and every group has its own dynamic. Some need to move faster than others, and some need more time for reflection.

For example, in Finland, long silences where people consider and reflect on a question before answering are not uncommon. This can feel very uncomfortable if you're not accustomed to that culture. You'll need to do your homework and compose a flow that's right for the group you are working with, and the situation you are working on.

OPENING   EXPLORING   CLOSING
(DIVERGENT)   (EMERGENT)   (CONVERGENT)
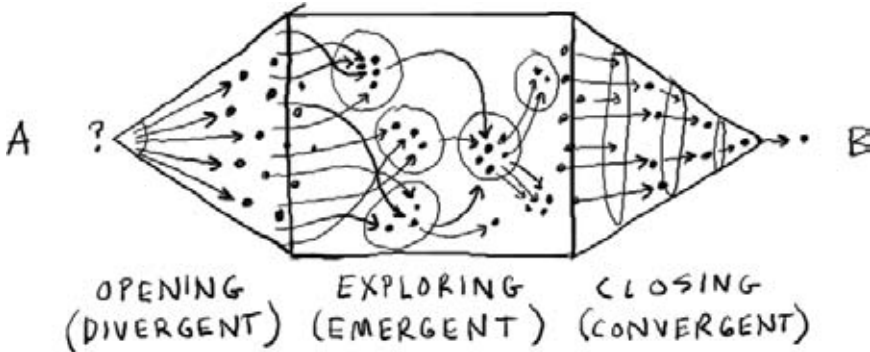
Opening, exploring, and closing are the core principles that will help you orchestrate the flow and get the best possible outcomes from any group. A typical daylong workshop may be filled with many games that can be linked to each other in an infinite variety of ways. Games can be played in series, where the outcomes of one game create the initial conditions for the next.

Here's a series where three games are played in a row. Each game has a clear opening, exploration, and closing. The outcome of each game serves as the input for the next. This kind of design is very simple, clear, and easy for everyone in the group to understand.
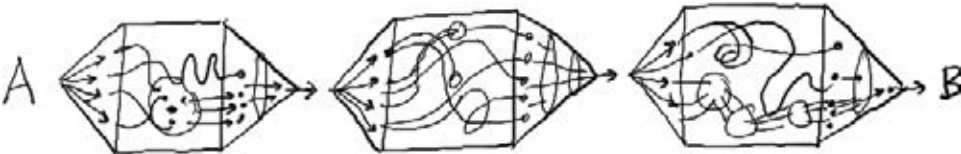
In the next series, three longer, more intensive games are interspersed with two shorter games. The shorter games might give the groups a chance to loosen up a bit between more intensive activities.
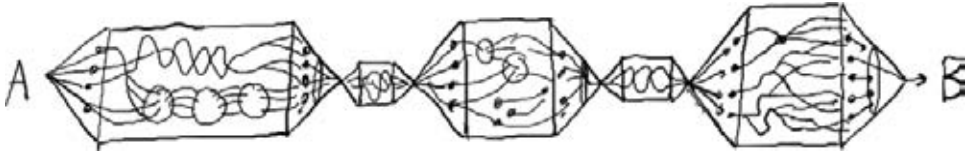
Sometimes, especially with a larger group, it makes sense to pursue multiple goals. A key concept in game design is a variation on opening and closing called break out/report back, where a larger group diverges by breaking out into smaller subgroups, plays a game or two, and converges by reporting back the outcome of their efforts to the larger group. This is a way to keep groups small and dynamic, and also increase the variety of ideas, by playing multiple games in parallel.

People also need time to reflect on ideas. Breakouts (or breaks) can be a good time for this. Break out/report back is a way to balance sharing and reflection and to create quiet time. For example, you can ask people in a group to spend time working on an individual exercise which they can then share with the group.

Here's a series where an initial, opening session reveals three different goals that can be pursued in parallel breakout groups. At the end of the series the three groups' outcomes are shared in a report-back session with the larger group.
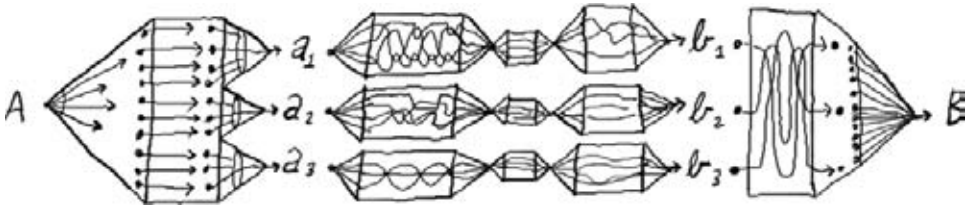
Here's a series where the outcomes of the first game generate inputs for five games, which generate inputs for two games, which generate the input for a single, longer game. This kind of string might indicate a workshop including multiple ideas and agendas that need to be worked on in parallel.
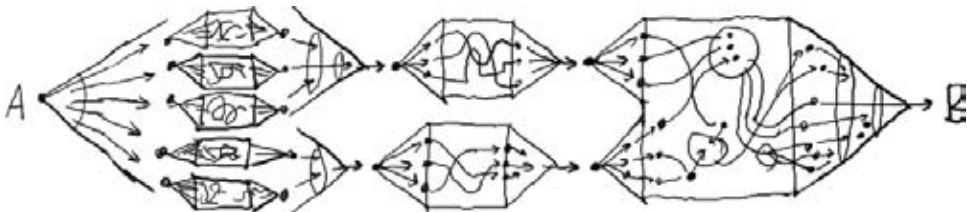
Here's a daylong game where a big chunk of the morning is spent on divergent activities, generating a lot of ideas and information, and the exploration phase is split into two parts, with a break for lunch, followed by an afternoon of convergent activities that flow into a single outcome. The group will lunch together at four tables for informal conversation and reflection on the morning's activities before going into the afternoon session. This kind of design might be appropriate for a group where everyone had some level of interest in every component of the day, and nobody wanted to be left out of any part of the game.
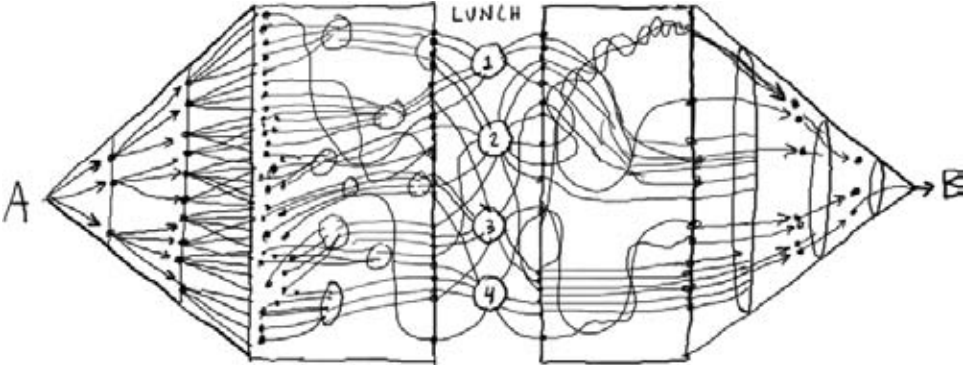
Sometimes you make discoveries while a game is underway that require a change in direction. In the following series, the initial opening and exploration revealed a new goal that the team had not anticipated. The group agreed to break into two subgroups; one group pursued the original goal and the second worked on the new goal.
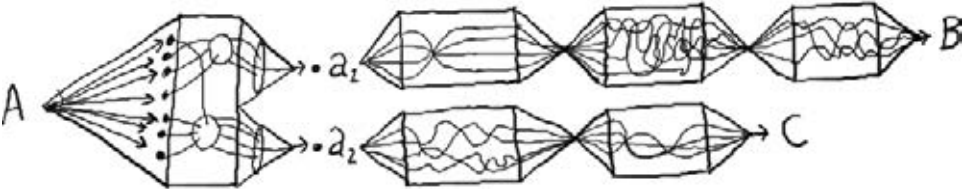
OK, so it's time to compose a game, or maybe a series of games. Where do you begin? What do you compose with? Remember that gamestorming is a way to approach work when you want unpredictable, surprising, or breakthrough results—a method for exploration and discovery.

Think about the people who explored the natural world for a moment: people like Columbus, Lewis and Clark, Ernest Shackleton, and Admiral Byrd. Imagine what it must have felt like to be one of these explorers. You are searching for something that you may not find. You will almost certainly find things you don't expect. You have only a vague idea of what you will encounter along the way, and yet, like a turtle, you must carry everything you need on your back.

Core Games

ONCE YOU START PLAYING AND CREATING YOUR OWN GAMES, you will likely find a short list of activities that work well in any situation. These are the reliable techniques that never let you down. They're simple enough to show up as "moves" in other games, making them a great place to start.

The 7Ps Framework

> *In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.* —Dwight D. Eisenhower

OBJECT OF PLAY

Every meeting deserves a plan. Note that a great plan can't guarantee a great outcome, but it will help lay down the fundamentals from which you can adapt. Sketch out these fundamentals by using the 7Ps framework.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

Individual

DURATION OF PLAY

20 minutes to 2 hours

HOW TO PLAY

Use these items as a checklist. When preparing for a meeting, thinking through the 7Ps can improve focus and results, even if you have only a few moments to reflect on them.

Purpose: Why are you having this meeting? As the leader, you need to be able to state this clearly and succinctly. Consider the urgency of the meeting: what's going on, and what's on fire? If this is difficult to articulate, ask yourself if a meeting is really necessary.

Product: What specific artifact will we produce out of the meeting? What will it do, and how will it support the purpose? If your meetings seem to be "all talk and no follow-through," consider how a product might change things.

People: Who needs to be there, and what role will they play? One way to focus your list of attendees is to think in terms of questions and answers. What questions are we answering with this meeting? Who are the right people to answer the questions?

Process: What agenda will these people use to create the product? Of all the 7Ps, the agenda is where you have the most opportunity to collaborate in advance with the attendees. Co-design an agenda with them to ensure that they will show up and stay engaged.

Pitfalls: What are the risks in this meeting, and how will we address them? These could be as simple as ground rules, such as "no laptops," or specific topics that are designated as out of scope.

Prep: What would be useful to do in advance? This could be material to read in advance, research to conduct, or "homework" to assign to the attendees.

Practical Concerns: These are the logistics of the meeting—the where and when, and importantly, who's bringing lunch.
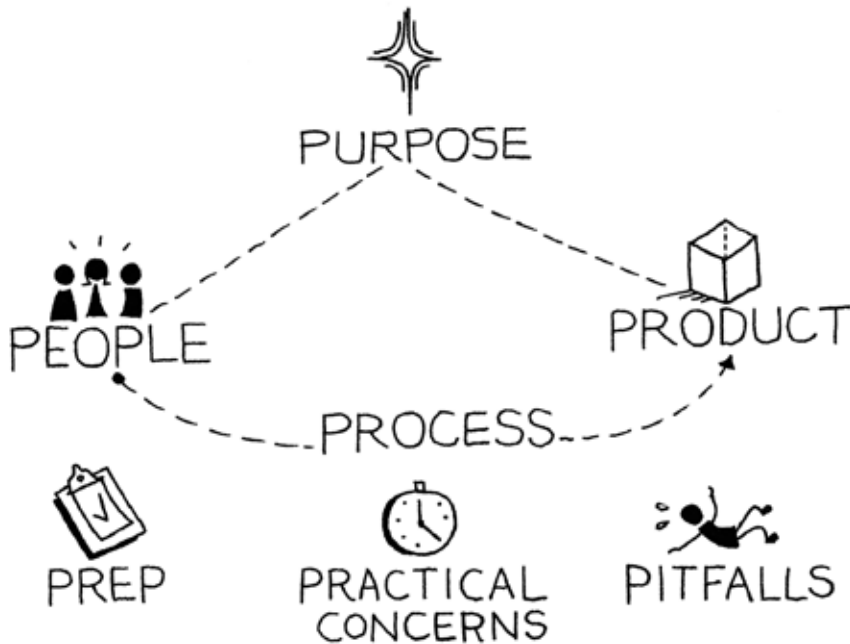
STRATEGY

- Each of the 7Ps can influence or change one of the others, and developing a good plan will take this into account. For instance, if you have certain participants for only part of a meeting, this will change your process.

- Get others involved in the design of the meeting. Their participation in its design is the quickest route to its effectiveness.

- Recurring meetings can take on a life of their own and stray from their original purpose. It's a healthy activity to revisit "Why are we having this meeting?" regularly for such events.

- Make the 7Ps visible during the meeting. These reference points can help focus and refocus a group as needed.

- Have a plan and expect it to change. The 7Ps can give you a framework for designing a meeting, but they can't run the meeting for you. The unexpected will happen, and as a leader you will need to adapt.

The 7Ps Framework is credited to James Macanufo.

Affinity Map

OBJECT OF PLAY

Most of us are familiar with brainstorming—a method by which a group generates as many ideas around a topic as possible in a limited amount of time. Brainstorming works to get a high quantity of information on the table. But it begs the follow-up question of how to gather meaning from all the data. Using a simple Affinity Diagram technique can help us discover embedded patterns (and sometimes break old patterns) of thinking by sorting and clustering language-based information into relationships. It can also give us a sense of where most people's thinking is focused. Use an affinity diagram when you want to find categories and meta-categories within a cluster of ideas and when you want to see which ideas are most common within the group.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

Up to 20

DURATION OF PLAY

Depends on the number of players, but a maximum of 1.5 hours

HOW TO PLAY

1. On a sheet of flip-chart paper, write a question the players will respond to along with a visual that complements it. Conduct this game only when you have a question for the players that you know will generate at least 20 pieces of information to sort.

2. Ask each player to take 10 minutes to generate sticky notes in response to the question. Use index cards on a table if you have a group of four or less. Conduct this part of the process silently.

3. Collect the ideas from the group and post them on a flat working surface visible to everyone. It should end up resembling the following figure.
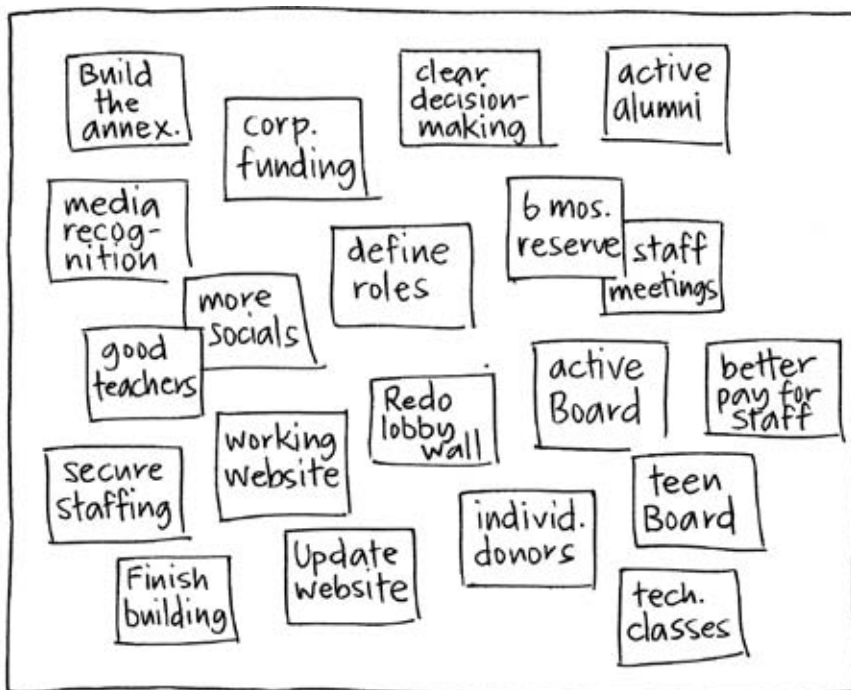
4. Based on guidance from the players, sort the ideas into columns (or clusters) based on relationships. Involve the group in the process as much as possible. Have the players approach the wall to post their notes—it saves time—and allow them to do an initial, general sorting in columns or clusters.

5. Create a sticky-note "parking lot" close to the display for ideas that don't appear to fall into a natural category. Redundancy in ideas is OK; don't discard sticky notes because they're already represented. It's helpful to leave repeated ideas posted since it indicates to the group how many people are thinking the same thing. At this stage, ask the players to try to avoid searching for higher categories and simply to focus on grouping the information based on the affinities.

6. Once the content is sorted, ask the group to suggest categories that represent the columns you've created and write the categories they agree on at the top of the column (or near a cluster if you chose a cluster rather than a column display). Don't let the players spend an inordinate amount of time agreeing on a name for a category. If there's disagreement over "Facilities" versus "Infrastructure," write them both. If the players produce categories that are significantly different, pay attention to which category gets the most approval from the group and write that one. Your visual may end up looking like the one below.

STRATEGY

The value of the Affinity Diagram game increases when two conditions are met. The first is that the players generate multiple data points, ideally with good information. The second relates to the quality of the sorting. The cleaner the players' insights when they form relationships within the content, the better the categories will be.

> *Fun, optional activity: Run through the Affinity Diagram game once, complete with categorizations. Then ask the group to reshuffle the sticky notes and recombine the ideas based on affinities they didn't notice in the first round.*

Sometimes affinities within content are crystal clear, so the sorting becomes less pivotal, but when those relationships are more nuanced, it's more important that the sorting process is done well. In a situation in which there are many ways to affinitize information, assume a stronger facilitative role. Ask questions about the columns or clusters to clarify the group's thinking and steer them toward an appropriate number of categories. If there are too many, the data gets watered down. If there are too few, the analysis gets watered down. Help the players find the sweet spot.

The affinity diagram was devised by Jiro Kawakita in the 1960s. It is also referred to as the KJ Method.

Bodystorming

OBJECT OF PLAY

Bodystorming is simply brainstorming, but done with the body. It may look different depending on the preparations and location, but in the end all bodystorming is fundamentally about one thing: getting people to figure things out by trying things out.

A group may explore one of the techniques described below to get their feet wet with bodystorming. They may move through them in order, from observing and learning to ideation and prototyping, although this is not a strict sequence. Each level of bodystorming will help break the pattern of analyzing ideas around a conference table and get people closer to developing things that will work in the real world.

HOW TO PLAY

Bodystorming takes place in three phases.

Level 1: Go Observe

Go to the location to do your work. If you are developing an idea for a coffee shop, or a shopping mall, or a hospital, go there and do your work as you would normally. The environment will present idea cues and authentic information that would never emerge from conference room brainstorming.

For example, say a group is charged with improving the student experience on a college campus. Although they may conduct interviews or other research, they may start by going to a few campus locations and "blending in" with the surroundings while going about their usual work. It's important that the group not zero in on any specific analysis so that they will be open to the cues that the environment presents.

Level 2: Try It Out

Use role play and props to develop an idea. In this exercise, a group physically "acts out" an experience by using whatever they have on hand or can acquire. The group focuses on how they interact with each other, their surroundings, and makeshift artifacts, testing existing ideas and uncovering new ones.

For example, say a small group is asked to "reimagine the evening news." Using each other as the actors, the audience, the news anchors, and the television itself, they improvise a script that plays out the experience as they conceive it could be.

1. Identify and assign critical roles. For any experience, identifying the "customer" or "user" role is a good way to get started. This participant (or group of participants) becomes the focal point and main character of the bodystorm.

   Other critical roles will present themselves. "Who wants to be the Internet?" is not an uncommon question to hear.

2. Improvise the experience. Bodystorming is physical and progressive: as the group starts to put their thoughts into action, they will naturally ask simple and important questions by acting them out, often leading to the unexpected. For example, in the evening news scenario:

    - "OK, so how do you watch the evening news?"

    - "I don't have a television. Also, I'm usually out jogging."

    - "Oh. Do you have your phone on you?"

    - "Always. I'm listening to music."

    - "OK, what if this happened… who wants to play the phone?"

    - In a completely improvised scenario, the group should keep in mind the principal rule of the game: building on each other's inputs. "Yes, and…" will generate more progress than "Yeah, but…" thinking.

In some uses of bodystorming, a group will act out a script prepared in advance. In these cases, an equal amount of planning in props to build an environment is key. For example, if it's a coffee shop, set up the counter and chairs. If it's a park or outdoor area, strongly consider going there.

Level 3: Reflect on What Happens, and Why

By enacting the experience, the participants will naturally explore new possibilities, and uncover flaws or assumptions about how an idea could work. This is valuable both in the process itself and afterward: by documenting the exercise on video, the participants may later "watch the reel" to discuss key points.

STRATEGY

Choose the right level of bodystorming at the right time for the group. Because bodystorming asks participants to take a big step away from the typical conference table mode of thinking, they may need to get comfortable with more structured sessions first, armed with scripts and specific roles, before stepping into complete improv. In all cases, the exercise itself will be more memorable than the customary problem-solving session, and will help generate empathy that comes from "embodying" the experience.

The term "bodystorming" was coined by Colin Burns at CHI '94 In Boston, Massachusetts.

Card Sort

OBJECT OF PLAY

Card sorting is a practice used frequently by information architects and designers to gather and structure inputs for a variety of purposes. In a common use of card sorting, information for a website is put onto the cards, and the sorting helps create categories for navigation and the overall architecture. The method works just as well for creating slides for presentations, or at any point where information needs to be sorted and organized in a sensible way.

The applications of card sorting are numerous, and in use it works similarly to Post-Up and affinity mapping. Card sorting can differ from these methods, however. First, the cards are generally prepared in advance, although participants should be allowed to create their own while sorting. Second, the cards are a semi-permanent artifact and can be used as a control over several exercises with different participants to find patterns among them.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

Small groups or individuals

DURATION OF PLAY

30 minutes or more, depending on the number of cards and participants

HOW TO PLAY

Use 3×5 index cards or similar. For a typical sorting exercise, aim for 30–100 cards in total; more than this range will likely overwhelm the participants, and fewer may not be meaningful enough to be worth the effort.

On each card should be a succinct bit of information; enough to tell the participants what it is and no more. Putting too much information on a card will slow down the sorting; not enough will cause confusion and will slow down the process even more.

Give the group the shuffled deck and a stack of blank cards. Describe the overall organization challenge, and ask them to sort the cards into groups that go together. If they think something is unclear or missing, they may alter a card or create a new one. Once they have created the groups, ask them to name them and describe them.

There are variations of sorting—including asking the group to rank the items from most to least desirable or to organize the cards into two categories such as "must have" and "nice to have." You may also ask the group to sort cards into a predefined set of categories, to test their validity.
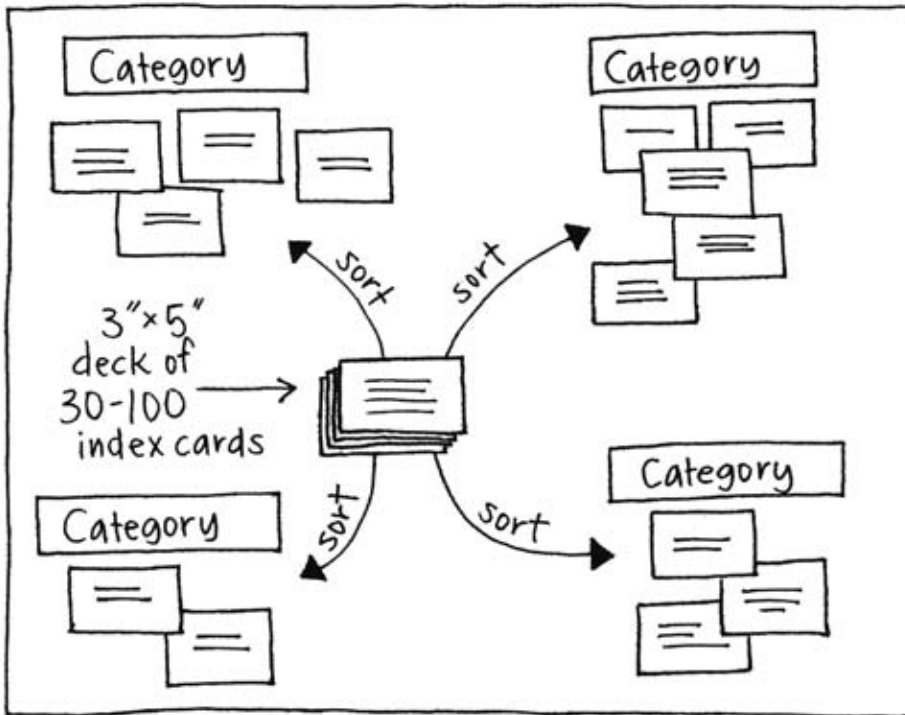
STRATEGY

Although the Card Sort game won't tell you everything you need to know about a set of information, it will help reveal the thought process of participants. In this sense, it's more about people than information. Only after a number of sorting exercises with a number of groups will larger patterns appear.

Card sorting is a common practice of information architects and designers of complex systems. Its actual source is unknown.

Dot Voting

OBJECT OF PLAY

In any good brainstorming session, there will come a time when there are too many good ideas, too many concepts, and too many possibilities to proceed. When this time has come, dot voting is one of the simplest ways to prioritize and converge upon an agreed solution.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

At least 3 participants; in larger groups, tallying votes will be more time-consuming

DURATION OF PLAY

Short

HOW TO PLAY

First, the group needs a set of things to vote on! This may be something they have just developed, such as a wall of sticky notes, or it may be a flip-chart list that captures the ideas in one place. Ask the group to cast their votes by placing a dot next to the items they feel the most strongly about. They may use stickers or markers to do this. As a rule of thumb, giving each participant five votes to cast works well.
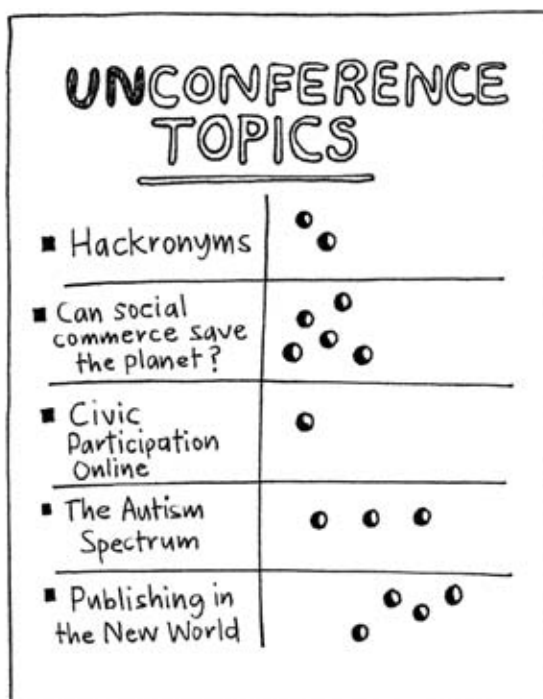
Participants cast their votes all at once and they may vote more than once for a single item if they feel strongly about it. Once all the votes are cast, tally them, and if necessary make a list of the items by their new rank.

This prioritized list becomes the subject of discussion and decision making. In some cases, it may be useful to reflect on ideas that didn't receive votes to verify that they haven't been left behind without cause.

STRATEGY

This technique is used to collaboratively prioritize any set of items. It could be used to hone a list of features, to agree on discussion topics, or to choose among strategies and concepts. Giving participants five votes is enough to be meaningful while still asking for individual prioritization; however, this is not a hard rule.

The original source of the Dot Voting game is unknown.

Empathy Map

OBJECT OF PLAY
The object of this game is to quickly develop a customer or user profile.

## NUMBER OF PLAYERS
3–10

DURATION OF PLAY
10–15 minutes

HOW TO PLAY
Personas help focus a group's attention on the people involved in a project—often the customer or end user. Although creating an empathy map is not the rigorous, research-based process that is required for developing personas, it can quickly get a group to focus on the most important element: people.

In this exercise, you will be creating a study of a person with the group. Start by drawing a large circle that will accommodate writing inside. Add eyes and ears to make it into a large "head."

1. Ask the group to give this person a name.

2. Label large areas around the head: "Thinking", "Seeing", "Hearing", and "Feeling".
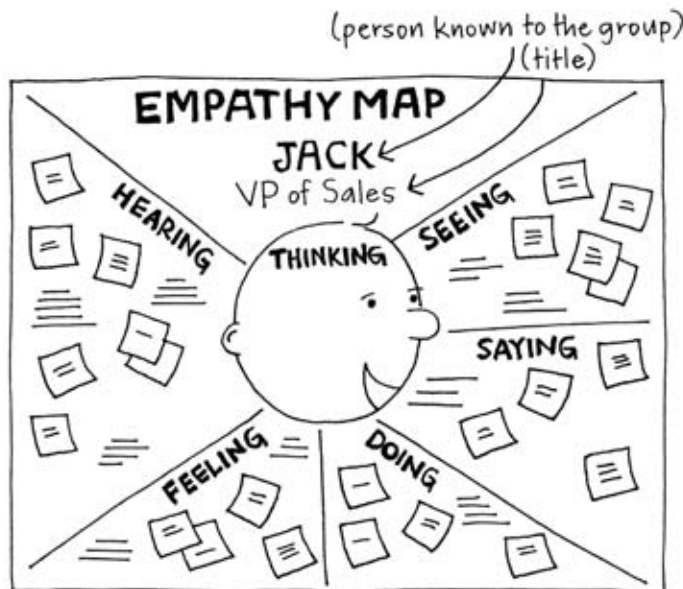
3. Ask the group to describe—from this person's point of view—what this person's experience is, moving through the categories from seeing through feeling.

4. The goal of the exercise is to create a degree of empathy for the person with the group. The exercise shouldn't take more than 15 minutes. Ask the group to synthesize: What does this person want? What forces are motivating this person? What can we do for this person?

STRATEGY

The group should feel comfortable "checking" each other by referring back to the empathy map. When this happens, it will sound like "What would so-and-so think?" It's good to keep the empathy map up and visible during the course of the work to be used as this kind of focusing device.

The Empathy Map game was developed by Scott Matthews of XPLANE.

Forced Ranking

OBJECT OF PLAY

When prioritizing, a group may need to agree on a single, ranked list of items. Forced ranking obligates the group to make difficult decisions, and each item is ranked relative to the others. This is an important step in making decisions on items like investments, business priorities, and features or requirements—wherever a clear, prioritized list is needed.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

Small group of 3–10 participants

DURATION OF PLAY

Medium to long; 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on the length of the list, the criteria, and the size of the group

HOW TO PLAY

To set up the game, participants need to have two things: an unranked list of items and the criteria for ranking them. Because forced ranking makes the group judge items closely, the criteria should be as clear as possible. For example, in ranking features for a product, the criteria might be "Most important features for User X." In the case of developing business priorities, the criteria might be "Most potential impact over the next year."

If there are multiple dimensions to a ranking, it is best to rank the items separately for each criterion, and then combine the scores to determine the final ranking. It is difficult for participants to weigh more than one criterion at a time, as in the confusing "Most potential impact over the next year and least amount of effort over the next six months." In this case, it would be best to rank items twice: once by impact and once by effort.

Although there is no hard limit on the number of items to be ranked, in a small-group setting the ideal length of a list is about 10 items. This allows participants to judge items relative to one another without becoming overwhelming. By making the entire list visible on a flip chart or whiteboard, participants will have an easier time ranking a larger list.

To play, create a matrix of items and the criteria. Each participant ranks the items by assigning it a number, with the most important item being #1, the second most important item as #2, and so forth, to the least important item. Because the ranking is "forced," no items can receive equal weight.

Once the items have been ranked, tally them and discuss the prioritized list and next steps.

STRATEGY

Creating a forced ranking may be difficult for participants, as it requires they make clear-cut assessments about a set of items. In many cases, this is not the normal mode of operation for groups, where it is easier to add items to lists to string together agreement and support. Getting people to make these assessments, guided by clear criteria, is the entire point of forced ranking.

The original source of the Forced Ranking game is unknown.

Post-Up

OBJECT OF PLAY

The goal of this game is to generate ideas with silent sticky note writing.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

1–50

DURATION OF PLAY

10 minutes to 1 hour

HOW TO PLAY

There are many ways to work with ideas using sticky notes. Generating ideas is the most basic play, and it starts with a question that your group will be brainstorming answers to. For example: "What are possible uses for Product X?"

Write the question or topic on a whiteboard. Ask the group to brainstorm answers individually, silently writing their ideas on separate sticky notes. The silence lets people think without interruption, and putting items on separate notes ensures that they can later be shuffled and sorted as distinct thoughts. After a set amount of time, ask the members of the group to stick their notes to the whiteboard and quickly present them.
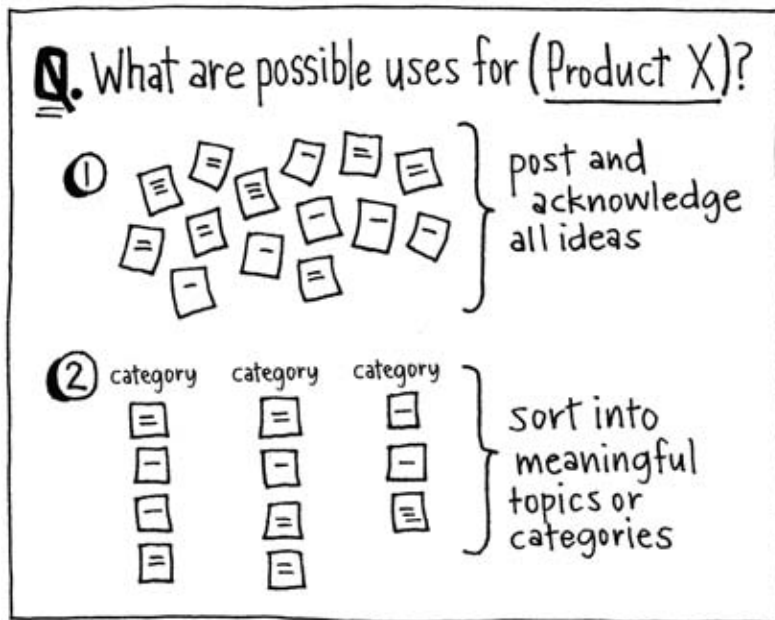
If anyone's items inspire others to write more, they can stick those up on the wall too, after everyone has presented.

STRATEGY

Generating ideas is an opening activity, and a first step. From here you can create an affinity map or a bottom-up tree, or further organize and prioritize the thoughts.

The Post-Up game is based on the exercises in Rapid Problem-Solving with Post-it® Notes *by David Straker.*

Storyboard

OBJECT OF PLAY

This game asks players to envision and describe an ideal future in sequence using words and pictures. Storyboarding as a technique is so versatile that it can be used to show any topic, not just an ideal future. But it is particularly powerful as a visioning exercise since it allows players to imagine and create possibilities. The players tell a story with a happy ending, planting tiny seeds for a different future. You can also use storyboarding to let employees describe their experience on a project, to show approaches to solving a problem, or to orient new employees on policies and procedures—its uses are limited only by the imagination.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

8–20

DURATION OF PLAY

45 minutes to 1.5 hours

HOW TO PLAY

Before the meeting, determine the topic around which the players will craft their "ideal" story. Once the meeting starts, divide the group into pairs or groups of three or four, depending on the size of the group. Provide markers, pads of flip-chart paper, and stands.

1. Tell the players that the purpose of this game is to tell the other players a feel-good story. The topic of the story is "The Ideal Future for [blank]"—for a team, a product, the company, whatever you decided beforehand. The players' assignment is to visually describe the topic and narrate it to the group.

2. After the groups are established, give them 20–25 minutes to (1) agree on an ideal state, (2) determine what steps they would take to get there, and (3) draw each step as a sequence of large images or scenes, one per sheet of flip-chart paper.

3. Give the players a two-minute time warning, and once the time is up, bring them back together. Ask for volunteers to tell the story first.

4. After all the groups have presented, ask them what's inspiring in what they heard. Summarize any recurring themes and ask for observations, insights, and "aha's" about the stories.

STRATEGY

As the leader of this game, be sensitive to the fact that many of the meeting participants will freak when you tell them that large-scale drawing is involved. Reassure them that the story is the point of the exercise and that the images play a supporting role. They can use words as captions to clarify the images and they can also select the "artist" within their group so that not everyone has to put marker to paper. (But it's more fun for those who do.) Finally, remind them that they aren't allotted sufficient time to create a da Vinci anyway, so stick figures work perfectly well.

For the presentation format, there are various options. Breakout groups can post each sheet of flip-chart paper in a row around the room and walk along the row as they tell the story. They can also leave the flip-chart pad intact and flip the pages over the stand as they narrate. They could choose to hang the sheets in rows and cover them, using one group member to act as a "Vanna White" and create a series of *voilà* moments. Tell them to have fun with it—they aren't being graded on their stories (although you could make it a contest if it's that kind of crowd). The process of creating and sharing the stories is what matters.

Walt Disney is credited for this activity. His need to animate Steamboat Willie *in 1928 led to the process of* storyboarding*—a story told in sequence on a wall covered with a special kind of board. He found it to be an effective way to track progress and improve a story.*

WhoDo

OBJECT OF PLAY

The objective of this game is to brainstorm, plan, and prioritize actions.

NUMBER OF PLAYERS

1–10

DURATION OF PLAY

20–45 minutes

HOW TO PLAY

Who do you want to do what? Almost any endeavor of substantial impact requires seeking help from others. Developing a WHO + DO list is a simple way to scope out the undertaking.

1. Start with the vision. Write out or visualize the big goal.

2. Draw a two-column matrix and write "WHO" on the left and "DO" on the right.

3. Ask: Who is involved in making this happen? Who is the decision maker? Who has needed resources? Who may be an obstacle? Whose support is needed? These individuals or groups are your list of WHOs.

4. The DOs are often harder. For each WHO, ask: What do they need to do, or do differently? What actions will build toward the big goal? Sharpen each WHO in the list until you have a desired and measurable action for each.

WHO + DO

Sponsors	Donate $5k per program
Board Members	Recommend 3 new sponsors
VP Development	Sign off on event concept
↓...	↓...

Given all of the possible WHOs and DOs, which are the most important? Who comes first?

STRATEGY

Bias yourself toward action. When brainstorming DOs, there is a tendency to slip into the easier mode of "we just want them to understand." Most often when you want people to understand something, it's because you want them to change something or learn something that they can then "DO." Ask yourself, or the group, "What will happen once they understand?" Don't shortchange what you are really looking for: action.

The WhoDo game is credited to Dave Gray.