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EDUCATIONAL GAMES ON FILE

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Even in the best of budgetary times, classroom teachers are often in need of an assortment of educational games for reinforcing learned concepts. The teacher can accumulate files on a variety of such games inexpensively and with a minimum of storage need. The games are prepared on file folders and when not in use store flat in a file drawer or box. The labels for each game are clearly visible so that even the youngsters can retrieve them with little difficulty. The labels can be pictures or symbols for non-readers and printed titles for children already acquiring recognition skills.

A good many of these games are typical board games which use a linear progression where one or more objects are moved from start to finish. However, instead of controlling movement by a spinner, dice or any arbitrary and "chancey" determiners often found in both educational and non-educational commercially produced games, the movement of the objects is controlled by using the very elements just learned. While primarily devised for word recognition skills, math facts, metric conversions, reading comprehension skills, or items from specific content areas all can provide the movement controls for the same game board when cues are placed on 3x5 index cards or appropriately sized pieces of oaktag. A correct identification of the element on the card leads to a one-space movement of the object along the linear path of the file folder game. Since the cards are independent of the game file folders, all are interchangeable and any child can play with any file game using his or her own set of control cards. Two children can play together either by pooling their cards and sharing their learning with each other or by each using his or her own deck. In the latter case, children of diverse abilities can play the same game and the weighted effect of using separate decks makes for an equal chance for either of them to win without being in direct academic competition.

Need for reinforcing and learning games in classrooms have produced similar ideas previously either by our own discoveries or by sharing with other teachers. However, there has not always been a sharing of some general learning principles involved with games in the classroom and this has led in many cases to abandonment of using games in classrooms. Any activity in the classroom is subject to the abilities of normal classroom decorum. Some teachers need to establish this decorum prior to introducing games in class, while other teachers gain the decorum through the use of games. Which comes first is not the issue here. What is of concern here is whether the game is a pure game and hardly related to education at all. We are charged with seeing that children learn and if they can have fun while doing this all the better, but we should not succumb to the reverse posture and see to it that they have fun at the expense of learning. The distinction between the two must be established. The object of a game for fun is

pleasure and perhaps development of peer group competitive skills. The object of an educational game is the learning or reinforcement of elements of larger educational concepts. As a result, some of the features of “fun games” ought not to be included in learning games unless these are the specific features the teacher is trying to reinforce. For example, pitfalls and penalties such as losing a turn or moving back a space makes some games more interesting and fill a vital life function of child development in learning how to deal with frustration. In the terms of the game, this is perhaps a minor aspect, but it strengthens the ability to deal with life’s adversities. However, in the learning or reinforcing educational game negative associations of such reversals (and they are usually arbitrary ones) of fortune can lead to negative transference. The child then associates the learning elements of the game with the frustrations of the penalty. Remember the child is not trying to learn, but to win the board game. It is you, the teacher, who sets up the board game so that learning takes place while the child plays the game. Of course, there are degrees of this frustration and the majority of the children will not likely stop the game solely because of the pitfalls and penalties. But with some younger or immature children or if this is a case of remediation why take the chance? For some children and young adults their frustration threshold is often exceptionally low.

The bonus aspect of the fun-game may also serve little purpose in educational games. Moving ahead three spaces may limit the necessary exposure of the elements being reinforced. Similarly, if the deck or words or math facts contain too many cards, the game will provide only limited exposure of each card during the course of play.

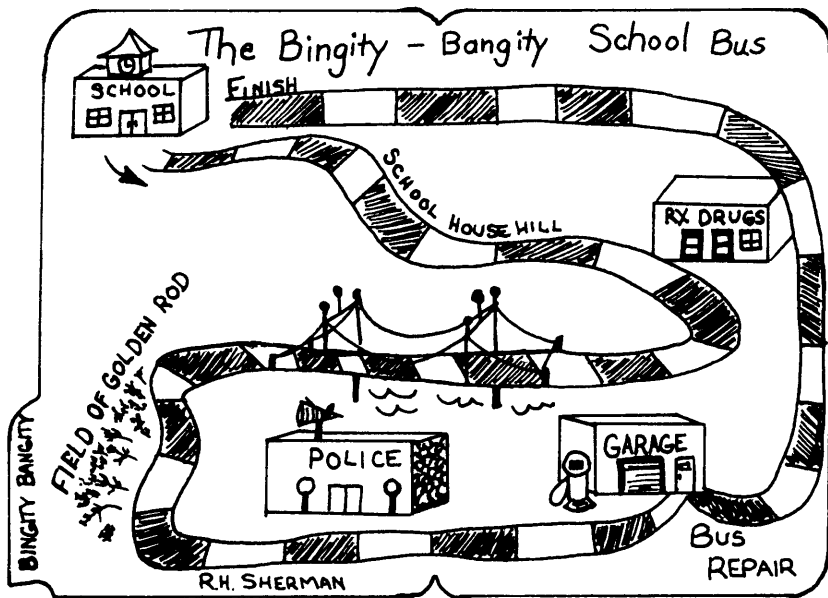
CREATING THE GAMES ON FILE FOLDERS

While I have developed several file folder games for the elementary grades I taught and watched my students in college methods courses develop some of them perhaps more artistically, there seems to be no reason that the concept be limited to early grades. The secondary school teacher who is cramped for space or may have to travel from room to room with each class can utilize file folder games and carry them in a briefcase or large pocketbook. Learning algebraic formulas or chemistry symbols or even foreign languages can have a good deal of common methodology with youngsters learning to read or do arithmetic.

As long as the teacher or child can cut and paste, the lack of artistic talent need not be a deterrent for constructing file folders. While the best situation stems from the children creating their own folder games since there is added motivation in personalized activities, the teacher should take care that the construction is not so time consuming that it presents an imbalance in proportion to the planned activity.

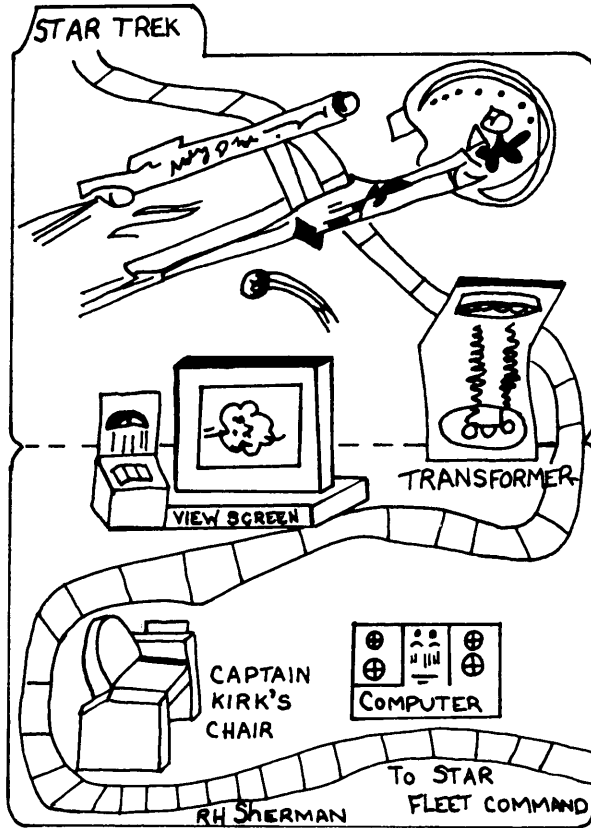
The first key move in constructing the games is to select popular children’s (not teacher’s) themes from their concrete book and television experiences. Current television favorites are Star Trek, the Fonz, The Six Million Dollar Man and the Bionic Woman which are being watched by early elementary and even primary grade youngsters. Some series’

popularity wanes fast and these are good introductory subjects for first file games. Even more concrete experiences from the children's lives can be used if they wish. Children's books read to and by children provide other stimuli which are as diverse as the progression across the file board to meet individually *One Monster After Another* by Mayer, or retracing the route of *The Bingity-Bangity School Bus* by Conkling, or filing behind mother duck as everyone tries to *Make Way For Ducklings* by McKlosky, or to travel through the settings that are in and around *Charlotte's Web* by White, or even travel down the Mississippi after Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. For social studies The Voyage of the Pilgrims and how to get from my house to school and back provide themes which may integrate the board items and the cards as well.



Whatever grade level and subject choice, the design should not be so elaborate that it completely obscures the learning aspects. Neither should the "journey" across the board be too short, for this limits the reinforcement and too many plays of the game can lead to reduced or total loss of interest. Your own design should not be so elaborate if you are artistically inclined so as to deter children from desiring to create their own games some of which they will make for the class and some for themselves to keep. You will find that the representation of the file game "Star Trek" is simple enough.

The objects that are moved across the board can be consistent with the game subject or can be any other device of the child's choosing. One game was developed directly as a result of a youngster who insisted on bringing his small racing cars to the Reading Lab. The situation was fast becoming a tug-of-war with the child bringing his cars and the teacher trying to hold

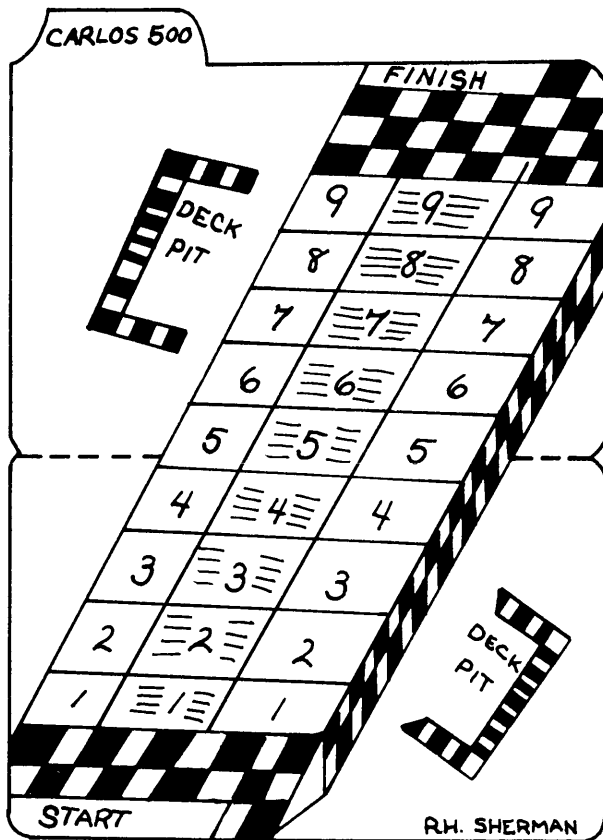


them so that he could pay attention and learn. A file folder was set up with the “Indy 500” which quickly became the “Carlos 500.” The names are another attempt at personalizing instruction wherever possible. In this case the materials were simply a file folder which had been used for something else at the time, some colored magic markers, a ruler, and Carlos’ cars. The game proved too short for his ability and was replaced by the “Carlos Grand Prix” and Carlos knew what all that meant and was now willing to read about races and racing cars.

RULES FOR THE GAMES

All games have rules; however, the educational games have some rules for teachers as well.

1. If the teacher plays with the child, she should not throw the game and deliberately lose, but should instead balance the competition. After all, teachers are supposed to know the material. To equalize the ability levels, have the child move the object after a correct response to the card. The teacher will move when the child is incorrect, but before play resumes the



teacher will review elements for that card. This is a legitimate opportunity for a teacher and child to compete in a relaxed atmosphere, and while some educators do not advocate competition at all, children still need to learn how to properly compete with adults most of whom maintain a different view of the place of the child. The teacher can and probably will win the early games, but as the game is replayed and the cards in the deck are rotated, the teacher can note that the child is rapidly catching up and can point this out to the child. The teacher must be certain to determine the extent of manipulation allowed under the educational framework. Just as the game should not exceed the educational aspects, so too should the educational thrust avoid cancelling out the game aspects. Above all, the teacher ought not to let the relationship degenerate into “two kids playing a game” and then expect to stand up and be teacher with all the authority implied with being teacher immediately at the end of the game.

2. Manipulation of the game can be achieved both by the number of control cards and difficulty of the control cards. If the teacher is working with an early learner or in a severe remedial situation with the chance that

the teacher is winning too often and by too much of a margin, then some partial credit ought to be allowed. For example, one space forward for a good attempt and two spaces forward for a correct response, but in this instance limit the number of cards in the deck for maximum exposure for each element. Similarly, for a child who seems to be progressing rather rapidly, more cards or cards with more difficulty may be inserted. A timed response may perk up the action and the interest or a flash exposure of material learned also bring some degree of satisfaction with this type of child.

3. If the child is going to play with other children, one or the other must know the correct answers and at this point reinforcement is most probably in its final stage. The child knows the work but perhaps responds slowly or self-corrects and needs no more than a second chance. This is a good opportunity for each child to share the contents of the personalized deck. If either one or both does not know an element in each deck it should be removed temporarily unless the teacher is nearby, for it may lead to reinforcement of an incorrect element. This may make it extremely difficult to correct later on.

4. Be wary of combining too many game aspects. Blind matching as in the game of "Concentration" along with the game board prolongs the interest, but it will also likely go beyond effective learning. Frustration of knowing the correct answer, but not being able to move on your response because of the necessity to find a match may lead to disinterest and dislike both for the game concept as well as in the material being learned.

5. Keep the rules simple and think carefully about altering rules in mid-game. The reality factor operates strongly in educational games. If a rule modification will produce better results, then after everyone in the game has completed that round, change the rules. It is also possible to have different rules to account for different ability levels and children will accept this if it is explained, but take extreme care with this form of handicapped style play. And as in this article, five rules should be more than enough.

As has been mentioned, board games and their relationship to education are not new to the classroom teacher, but avoiding some pitfalls and establishing some fundamental ground rules will make them more successful in their two-fold objective of learning and enjoyment. They are their own reward and a teacher ought to be reticent about supplying prizes at the end of each game, for then the focus shifts from the learning and from the game itself to the prize. This is already two steps beyond the purpose for having educational games on file.