

What is a Creative Game?

FAQ

What's a Creative Game (CG)?

It is an event that lasts for several (3-20) days and brings together large groups of people (15-120) from different backgrounds to work on the following tasks: create a new vision, develop new strategies, find solutions to different problems, develop projects to resolve these problems, build teams, free people of their biases, and give a new impetus to social change.

The methodology of Creative Games is called Methodology of Systemic Thought-Activity (MSTA).

A CG is designed and run by a group of STA-methodologists, with the help of Game-facilitators. The development of a new Game is a very complex, difficult, challenging, but rewarding creative task.

Why is it called Game?

Because it is fun. It gets people to use their intellectual abilities, thesauri, and outlooks. It is played rather than worked on. It takes place in a conventional space, free of the real life disturbances. It has as much in common with a Game as brainstorming has with a storm.

What is its background?

In 1953 (the year of death of Stalin), four philosophers from Moscow invented a new type of methodology for collective intellectual problem-solving. The first Games took place in the 1970s in the Soviet Union. The closest equivalents in the US and Western Europe, would be brainstorming, simulations, facilitated workshops and similar Person-to-Person techniques.

In 2003-2004, a group of Caucasus methodologists and Game-facilitators run two very important Games under the auspices of the Caucasus Forum: "Civil Society in the Caucasus" and "Youth Problems in the Situation of Unresolved Conflicts". The reports of these two Games have been made available since then.

Why is it relevant to the Caucasus?

Caucasus is a region which is home to a variety of cultures and ethnicities, but it is also rife with conflict. One of the aims of the Game is to enable its participants to overcome their cultural biases and preconditions, by getting them to work together, regardless of their ethnic background.

In the last 15 years, Caucasus has witnessed a dramatic fall in education standards. Therefore such methodological Games serve as a useful tool to introduce participants to new and diverse methods of thought, communication and planning, which they would not otherwise have access to. In addition, it is also a great

opportunity for people from different backgrounds to share their knowledge and experiences with each other.

Why is it relevant to the issues of civil society (CS)? –CG can be used to address almost any issue/problem. It is particularly useful for the issues of concern for CS. In today's CIS building civil society has become one of the most important tasks. A developed CS is necessary to build just, prosperous and stable societies and polities. But the concept of civil society is difficult to define. It is an innovative social concept and a new social group for the CIS. CG, in its turn, is an innovative methodology which helps to define the interrelationship of CS with social and political processes which take place in the CIS. CS aims at critically evaluating social and political processes, diagnosing their shortcomings and helping other social and political actors, including state actors, to overcome them. CG is a tool/method that CS can use to achieve that purpose fast and effectively.

Why is it relevant to conflict transformation (CT)? –One of the main methods of conflict transformation is to convene representatives from opposing sides in a secure environment and allow them to discuss their issues, find out more about each other, build mutual trust, and go on to jointly discuss and find solutions to their problems. CT specialists aim to achieve this in many different ways: via “principled negotiations” methods, by transcending incompatible interests, etc. One of the major goals of these methods is to overcome the limitations of realpolitik paradigm (or its ethnonationalist modification) when dealing with conflict transformation.

The CG methodology allows the participants to work on a joint task not directly connected with the conflict, whilst putting aside their ethnic and political background. Participants in such a Game strive for intellectual and creative achievement rather than for power and superiority. Simultaneously, they establish new relationships and learn more about each other. During the Game, they experience working together, creating together and achieving together, and begin to feel that such joint work is possible. They become followers and implementers of the results of the Game. They remember the feeling of mutuality and co-existence after the Game, and cannot easily go back to a politically competitive paradigm.

What is the role of a Game facilitator?

S/he helps people to get rid of their prejudices by broadening their intellectual horizons. S/he leads the collective intellectual process in a Game group so that the process does not deviate from its route. S/he translates participants' ideas/concepts into the 'languages/vocabulary' of each team and into the 'language' of the Game. S/he helps the participants to learn the 'language' of the Game—which demands that every idea is drawn on the board rather than told to the group. S/he may be strict for example by challenging those who consider themselves experts on an issue, in order to demonstrate the limitations of their knowledge. S/he may interrupt/intervene when the group is deviating from the main intellectual point and break the trail of thought. At the same time s/he helps participants to play by opening up their creative capacities, which helps them feel empowered and become more creative.

What are the results of a Game?

'Tangible' results consist of the drawings produced during the Game, the minutes taken during the group presentations at joint sessions for all the groups, and the reports from the facilitators of the Game. This material encapsulates some of the intellectual value of the Game. The reports from the facilitators contain the main conclusions, recommendations and project ideas. However this written evidence is only the tip of the iceberg. The main result is the participants of the Game, who leave this event filled with new ideas and vision, with a belief that they can implement these new projects in partnership with the other side. The participants bear the fruits of the Game.

How to use them?

In addition to concrete ideas, actual proposals and ways for solving problems, the Game provides a bird's eye on how to approach problems like those looked at during the event. For instance, after the Caucasus Youth Creative Game it became obvious that future large-scale youth programmes should be cross-border. They should work towards getting together different groups of young people to learn and find out more about each other, instead of being based in one society and culture, without any interaction with the outside. However if such programmes are set up inside a society, they should try and build up the capacity of youth to reach out to their neighbours. If one concentrates on building the identity of the youth in one society without creating a dialogue with the outside, that effort is likely to be wasted, and the identity, instead of being strengthened, will weaken. Vice versa: if one builds up the identity of one group in contact and communication with the other groups, their individual identities will be strengthened in the most effective, positive and inclusive way.

Why other methods are insufficient to achieve the same result?

Sometimes because of shortage of resources (time, money, people) conventional methods of problem solving can be too result-oriented, and fall short of a successful implementation. For instance, during the Caucasus Forum meeting regarding its 5-year long strategy in October-2003, one group worked on one of its main strategic activity lines, called confidence-building. This group was expected to determine which social groups from which Caucasus societies should meet together, in what order and what should be discussed. The group, however, used the Game facilitation technique and came to the conclusion that the main aim of confidence-building was to understand what is "confidence" and to build it up on different levels.

They recommended that this should be done through a series of interaction between the Forum leaders, with political elites, grassroots and peers in their own societies. The leader of the plenary was irritated because this conceptual result did not present a clear template on who should meet whom, when and with what purpose. Moreover, working inside one's own society for an all-Caucasus network devoted to confidence-building between the societies seemed to be a diversion and an unnecessary deviation.

Subsequent events however demonstrated that indeed whilst some circles of CS leaders in each Caucasus entity have already developed good and trustful relations

with each other, but sometimes they do not yet enjoy full trust and confidence in their own societies. Without such a cross boundary dialogue, qualitative change will not take place.

In this way the CG method helped to diagnose and bring to the attention of CF leaders, decision-makers and the larger network an important strategic problem which would have otherwise passed unnoticed. After it was diagnosed, it became possible to plan a set of activities to address that problem.

Why does it seem so complex?

This method is no more complex than, say, writing a more conventional project proposal aiming at a large-scale social and political impact (e.g., proposals for conflict transformation work of several years duration). Like with any other method, it has developed its own ‘vocabulary’ and tools which may appear to be inaccessible at first.

Writing a conventional project proposal, is, in fact, an even more complex undertaking. If you have not sufficiently looked at the HOW rather than only WHAT, or have written enough about the processes of implementation of the project - it will fail—and that understanding of responsibility makes it a very complex endeavour.

Good conflict transformation specialists know the importance of the PROCESS which, if wrong or left unattended will jeopardise results. The CG methodology offers a process which is well-thought through, has been tested over a number of years in different contexts, and is also fun and aesthetically attractive (the resulting multicolour drawings of ideas catch one’s eye).

In which areas can it be used?

The CG methodology can essentially be used in any area. It has been used in urban work, architecture, environmental work, ethnic conflict transformation, civil society development, legal work, organisational development, design, education, politics, economy, finances etc.

It is perhaps most successful when applied to organisational change (the results will be shared by the entire organisation and its environment, and implemented by the leadership); developing a joint vision, and reforming institutions. It can also be used to address scientific problems. In this case the method provides an environment in which scientists can spot which elements of the problem they have missed so far.

The Game may also help them solve problems which seemed irresolvable beforehand, make discoveries and invent new gadgets.

What are its shortcomings?

Not every participant will or is able to grasp the entire result of the Game. Therefore some of them may feel dissatisfied (while the majority feel even if not totally satisfied by the results, at least significantly intellectually refreshed).

If the participants are particularly intellectually weak or not numerous, the result of the Game may suffer.

People who did not take part in the Game may have difficulties in understanding its results. Those who have never taken part in such a Game may find it even more difficult to understand the conclusions of the Game, than those who have some experience of the Game.

Its results may be left unimplemented (for instance, when its recommendations go against the plans of the leadership of beneficiaries).

Game does not promise or provide easy solutions, but it brings about a feeling of unity among the participants which does not happen in the day-to-day life. Therefore some of those who took part in the Game may feel withdrawal symptoms when returning to their daily routines. In the context of conflict transformation they may experience psychological discomfort from the need to go back to the conflict biases, which they have freed themselves of during the Game. This may generate a need to build confidence between Game participants and the rest of their societies;-)

Sometimes the Game may frustrate those participants who link their personal authority to their professional expertise: the Game environment challenges professional expertise by trying to get people to put aside their prior knowledge in order to see new and untried opportunities.

Can this method be used in a more cost-effective way?

CG is in fact very cost-effective: in a few days it achieves what organisations or institutions may try to accomplish in months or years (and many of them never do): a joint vision and several ways on how to move towards implementing it. However, if running a Game still seems too expensive, methodological seminars can be used instead.

Those who have taken part in Games can use this methodology in other areas of their activities. However, to gain the necessary skills, one has to patiently and open-mindedly take part in one or more Games or in several seminars.

Some opinions from the Game participants

‘Returning from the Game we cannot understand our peers because we speak totally different languages! We should increase the understanding with others via engaging them in the Game methodology’

‘We learn how to think and how to love, and it becomes then impossible to ‘de-learn’ it’

‘Instead of being an Armenian or an Azerbaijani, a Georgian or an Abkhaz, we become brothers and sisters, mothers and sons’

‘We cannot forget the feeling of total freedom and go on living as we did before the Game’

'I understood for the first time how to evaluate a project idea from the first sight'

'I don't know how to apply all that we have achieved but know definitely how will I apply this matrix in my office'

'This teaches us to give rather than to take, and not to be scared of being left worse-off'