

Chapter 4

The playing '80s – Russian activity games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the social context of the activity games in Russia. Russian history knows two original game methods, of which the open and problem-centred activity games form the second generation. Their influence on Russian society can be assessed on two levels: from the point of view of personal change and social mobility; and as providing society with a structured space for professional and political reflection. The unique practical experience of activity games make them a promising subject for comparative game theory.

THE SPREAD OF ACTIVITY GAMES

The former Soviet Union had forms of critical and innovative thinking that developed outside the control of the governing political structures. One of them – more public than the private kitchen talks, less political than the dissident movements – was to play activity games. From the late 1970s and throughout the gradual dissolution of the Soviet Union, the activity games inspired a veritable movement with hundreds of full-time playing activists. People gathered in rest homes outside town to play out the future of their profession, town or region.

The original activity games were invented in 1979 and organized by members of the Moscow Methodological Circle, an informal scientific community led by the logician Georgy Shchedrovitsky (Shchedrovitsky and Kotel'nikov, 1988). Each year, up to 20 big activity games were organized in major Soviet cities like Riga, Kiev, Kharkov, Erevan, Minsk, Moscow, Chelyabinsk, Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk and Mirnyi. One peak was reached in 1989, when about 30 big games and 80 smaller ones were organized in one year. The bigger games usually had over one hundred participants, and the smaller from 10 to 60 players. The games lasted from five to twenty days. The organizers of activity games now estimate that about half a million citizens have participated in at least one activity game. The participants were usually physicians, city planners, designers, engineers, pedagogues or psychologists.

A list of activity games held in 1989 provides us with the name of the leader of each game, the number of persons assisting him or her, the number of other players,

and the theme, place and duration of the game. To give a few examples, by far the largest game that year was organized in Kaliningrad by Georgy Shchedrovitsky and his team of 30 assistants. The theme was 'Experiments and experimental fields in education'; the game lasted nine days and had between 600 and 850 participants. Another game, led by Alexandr Zinchenko together with 21 assistants, had been ordered by the town of Surgut and dealt with the problems of 'Developmental perspectives of the Surgut region in conditions of self government and regional cost accounting'. A third example was 'Planning new school subjects,' in which 65 participants played during three days under the guidance of Jury Gromyko and nine assistants (*Kentavr*, 1/1990, 59–70).

TWO RUSSIAN GAME METHODS

In their external form, geographical spread and theoretical background the activity games constitute a unique phenomenon that is still practically unknown in the West. Historically, the activity games can be seen as the second generation of Russian game theory and practice.

As early as 1932, the first so called action game (*'delovaia igra'*) was held at the Institute of Engineering and Economics in Leningrad. Maria Birshtein used the idea of military games to develop a new form of games that could increase productivity in civil production. All in all, around 40 action games were organized before the war. In 1938, this branch of applied science was officially forbidden, along with cybernetics and genetics. Then, after being silenced for decades, the Russian action game method was revived at the end of the 1960s. Ironically enough, this revival was made possible by articles about similar Western action games that had been invented in 1956 in the USA. The reviews were even written by the same woman, Maria Birshtein, who over 20 years earlier had been developing the world's first action games herself. The action games grew in popularity during the beginning of the 1980s: from 300 model games in the year of 1980, to almost 600 four years later and 744 in 1986 (Belchikov and Birshtein, 1989, 73–96).

For many years the action games (*'delovaia igra'*) spread alongside the activity game (*'deyatelnostnaia igra'*). The two forms were not more than superficially in touch with each other. Attempts to compare them have described the different games as belonging to a first and a second 'game generation'. Games of the first type, the action games, follow a fixed scenario and aim at optimal and rational solutions through the modelling of standardized situations. The next generation of games began with the organizational activity games introduced by the circle of Georgy Shchedrovitsky. They were by contrast named 'open' games, as they deal with developing flexible game scenarios and are not based on ready solutions (Zhezhko, 1987).

It seems that in Soviet society before and during perestroika these two main game forms – the action and the activity games – had an inexhaustible amount of less widespread applications, developments and distortions under different headings (innovative games; educational activity games, projecting games; teaching imitative games; etc). In 1987, Zhezhko mentions nine game organizing groups (probably with

15–25 members each) specializing only in open games for social planning. Jury Gromyko counts as many as 20 groups organizing organizational activity games in 1991. Alexander Prigozhin adds three independent schools – in Tallinn, Novosibirsk and Tiumen – that are supposed to have developed independently of the activity games (Zhezhko, 1987; Gromyko, 1991; Prigozhin, 1987; see also the journal *Kentavr*).

Which parts of the Russian game teams that are seen as original, false or secondary vary according to source. Due to personal and/or political reasons, the ‘borrowing’ of other’s work did not always take very polite forms. The sociologist and consultant Vladimir Dudchenko does not once refer to Georgy Shchedrovitsky for instance, although his method of innovative games clearly is a more common sense and quicker results’ – adaptation of the activity games (cf. Dudchenko, 1991).

Despite the differences between action games and activity games, public opinion in Russia ‘has placed them on a par, or “glued” them to each other’ (Zhezhko 1987, 5). Prigozhin (1987, 76–79) even claims that both game generations should be theoretically approached as one large movement around what he calls ‘practical action’ games.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE ACTIVITY GAMES

While discussing the social significance of the most active period of activity games, one should perhaps first of all stress the personal implications for the people involved in organizing games. In the hierarchical Soviet society, with its strict and formalized rules of official behaviour, the games were one of the rare semi-official grounds for playing with personal meanings and identities.

Personal change

During the 1980s, playing activity games grew into an independent way of living and knowing. During a whole decade they attracted hundreds of students and young professionals. These people moved from town to town and from one school of game theory to the next. After a shorter or longer playing period, most ended up either in new professional contexts or in still more asocial or non-traditional settings.

As an example of the first trajectory we can take a presently internationally well-known expert on contemporary Soviet avant-garde art, Olga N, who was trained as a psychologist in Moscow and worked as a game technician in the activity games organized by Georgy Shchedrovitsky from around 1987. During one of the games held with the Union of Cinematographers, Olga developed contacts that enabled her to make two documentary films on hitherto forbidden Soviet art and architecture, and eventually to establish herself as an art critic.

Another kind of social mobility is exemplified through Sergei Naumov, the young physician from Chelyabinsk who became one of the leading theoreticians of the Moscow Methodological Circle in the beginning of its playing period. Eventually Naumov quit rational science altogether and shifted to spiritual and parapsychologi-

cal groups. (In between, he experimented with spiritual and bodily forms of activity games.)

These persons could of course have had similar fates without meeting the game movement. But at this time, at the beginning of the perestroika, the games served as one of the mechanisms for change and social mobility. After a few years of active playing, most persons moved on to use the acquired cognitive and social skills in other spheres. Between 1987 and 1991, the words game movement, *igrovoe dvizhenie*, even acquired a pejorative meaning, denoting those who 'couldn't stop playing and grow up at last' by socializing back into more normal working life.

The enormous popularity of different game forms is thus partly explained by the homogeneity of Soviet society. The games may to some extent have substituted other forms of therapeutic and psychological help, which were not available at that time in Russia.

The spirit of activity games

The games did not have explicit political aims or a certain adopted political viewpoint, but they were experiences of 'another life', of 'a world with other values' and 'an attempt to really change something'. I suppose that playing as an alternative lifestyle was most intense around the original activity games. In their form and thematics they were the most complex, ambitious and utopian, providing most space for 'useless', imaginative and wild moves, and with a charismatic, legendary and controversial philosopher as their leader.

One description of Georgy Shchedrovitsky helps to understand the general spirit of the activity games. This is how the philosopher Alexandr Pyatigorsky remembers their shared student years at the philosophical faculty in Moscow in the beginning of the 1950s:

'Talking about Shchedrovitsky, it is important to mention the uniqueness of his human position. I do not know what he felt at that time (the last years of Stalinism), but he had an exceptional habit of behaving with other people like if nothing bad at all had happened, or ever would happen. He also had (I acquired it much later myself) this manic feeling of a goal, in comparison with which no circumstances can or should matter... Shchedrovitsky was optimistic in a totally exceptional way.' (Pyatigorsky and Sadovsky, 1993, 46)

This optimism and personal determination continued to attract followers during the four following decades. Shchedrovitsky could not continue as a postgraduate student because of his opinions, 'in the middle of the 50s he was – those were the manners – forbidden to show up at the faculty, in order not to twist the minds of the students' (Pyatigorsky and Sadovsky, 1993, 54). To attend the seminars of Shchedrovitsky was also an ethical choice.

A space for reflection

The most important social function of the activity games was to provide a space for reflection. As one example of this, we can look at the activity game conducted in 1987 at the RAF factory near Riga (this game is described and discussed in Popov and Shchedrovitsky, 1989).

In Latvia, the well-known RAF automobile factory was going to elect a new director. The first democratic elections were to be organized in the form of two activity games within six weeks: one on the choice of five candidates, another around the election of one of them as director. In 1987, the idea of reviving workers self-organization and democratic participation in the ruling of enterprises was a new and hot topic; the game got much publicity even before it began. The game organizers had invited potential directors and other experts from outside, which immediately aroused hostility among the factory's leadership and their own (and only) candidate. The stated aim of the game organizers was to create an open discussion of the professional qualities of the different candidates. This was a new thing in a situation where the participants did not initially believe there would be any real elections. Their distrust was proven the second day, when the factory direction made secret negotiations with ministers and party officials in Riga and Moscow on the subject that after the game would be over, the real director should be appointed by these instances (as it had always been done before) (Popov and Shchedrovitsky 1989, 38–42).

Politically, the game succeeded in actually organizing free elections with several serious candidates. But the main aim of the organizing team was to discuss the situation at the factory and the ways of developing more democratic forms of management. The first part of the game had three working groups: the candidates, the experts, and the factory workers. The conflicts that emerged between these groups during the game served as an example of the 'real-world' problems of cooperation and democratic decision-making. The participants formulated these conflicts into two problems: the problem of equal access to relevant knowledge, and the problem of how to establish spaces of free communication, new democratic fora, after the game.

This is one short example of how the activity games stimulated and structured reflection and critique of the reform process in Russia. In this space for reflection, individuals and groups formulated their personal attitudes and professional strategies for a society in transformation. In what ways and how well these strategies were afterwards implemented demands detailed and concrete study. Most of the big activity games have been documented and taped, which provides us with a huge amount of material for social and gaming research.

The activity games were part of the 'protest society' that in the 1980s formed the first elements of a post-Soviet civil society (Duka and Zdravomyslova 1992, 21). In several cases, the method of activity games proved not to be suited for a long-term and patient development of long-lived alternatives. Another major problem was the internal hierarchy, *de facto* structured around the worshipped leader. Both of these problems are typical also for other new autonomous movements in the, then, Soviet Union.

THE ACTIVITY GAMES TODAY

The activity games movement began to decline at the beginning of the 1990s, when the social demand for general discussions and reorientation ceased. Due to the new economic constraints, it became more difficult to gather people from all around the

country for one week just for the sake of reflecting one's activity. And for the first time, the different branches of the activity game's movement got a possibility to institutionalize themselves. The ones that survived this challenge concentrated on practical work in a particular sphere (like new school subjects in education, regional programmes, or industrial reorganization).

The activity games in Russia have today lost their encompassing thematical scope. Most of them have approached other kinds of more down-to-earth 'open' or action games in the spirit as well. Nowadays the techniques of activity games are adopted to smaller and more flexible forms (an impressive example is the regional developmental programme for a small Siberian town presented in Liborakina, 1992). One branch of the playing movement educates professional game organizers.

The time of free, full-time, devoted playing in Russia is over. The current situation in the country is closer to the conditions for organizing working place games in the West. At the same time, the large experience of organizing activity games has provided the Russian game community with specific tools and theoretical insights. Both factors can serve to facilitate an East-West exchange in game and simulation theory.

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