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Untitled. Illustration by Gabriel Alayza Moncloa.



# Special Issue

# Revisiting Teaching and Games. Mapping out Ecosystems of Learning

edited by

Björn Berg Marklund, Jordan Loewen-Colón and Maria Saridaki



# Issue 15 (2021)

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# Teaching Music Theory through Games. To Play, Or Not to Play?

Stavroula Mpoti

#### **Abstract**

Games will always be the most convenient means of incorporating pleasure, fantasy and collaboration into the educational process. But what is the right way to do this? Through my experience, I have learned that there are a few things that teachers must have in mind when they want to achieve learning through games, otherwise the results might be different from the expected ones. Below, I present my viewpoints upon my personal experience from the first attempt I had, while trying to incorporate games in my music theory class.

**Key words:** Music Theory, Games, Teaching, gamevironments

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### **Evolving Games into Music Theory**

As soon as I started teaching music, I combined the educational process with the game. From the time I was a student, until I became a music teacher, the music theory lesson had been the most unpleasant music lesson in the conservatoires, because it contained only passive learning ways (rules and behavioral exercises) with no substantial connection with the real aim/use of this lesson: playing music! So, I

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wanted to change this sterile traditional way of learning and share a new fun side of music theory with my students, through games. I wanted to make them play (with)

My first students were six to seven years old and their previous age was inextricably linked to play. So, I thought that games would be the most appropriate means for them to move smoothly into the educational process. As it will be mentioned, the result was the desired one. Each music theory class contained 15 minutes of theory and the remaining 45 minutes were devoted to practice through any game and usually through their favorite board games. Gradually evaluating each game, I created my own games with more positive and attractive elements, avoiding possible difficulties and failures that may have prevented the students from getting involved in the gaming process.

#### **The Experiment**

music.

Gradually, I managed to create a new lesson from which the children took for granted in all lessons and for many years. This form consisted of the following elements: practice the learning material through the various tasks of the game, collaborative learning and reward. More specifically, the students were divided into small groups of three or four people. Each team played the game after passing various tasks which consisted of examples and exercises related to their lesson. Those tasks had been prepared before each lesson and had to do with music theory questions, rhythmic-singing-listening exercises, body percussion and playing or composing short melodies on the piano. If the majority of the students in each team won, then they could raise their score or move on to the board game. There was a separate exercise for each player of each team and no one else had the right to answer, but they could



help the player with the methodology of the exercise and direct him/her to find the solution, without pointing it out directly or indirectly. The team that would manage to collect the most points or complete the course of the game first, was also the winning team.



Figure 1. Music board game, Music Discoveries.

Each team that managed to complete the game, or exceeded a certain score, received a sticker as a reward. Those stickers did not have quantitative characterizations (first, second, etc.) but qualitative ones (music genius, super musician, music expert, etc.). I tried not to discriminate on the stickers so that there is a relative parity in the classroom. So, I never noticed competition, or disappointment among them. Everyone was just trying to achieve their goal. Basically, I wanted to create an atmosphere based on democracy and equality within the classroom through this playful process, since it itself can be paralleled to a social process. In both of them there are rules, goals, ways of thinking and moving, tasks to *survive*, collaboration

protocols, success and failure, and all of them under the umbrella of chance. An attractive and successful playful activity is absolutely connected with the system of motivation. Players need motivation to keep playing (Gomes et al. 2014). So, my motivation for them to keep learning, were games.

#### **The Problem**

This particular way of teaching was something that pleased both me and my students and offered us a great number of skills. But like any new experiment, it had some failures in its implementation. Sometimes, usually at the end of the year, I discovered that I did not have the time to teach all the elements that I should have according to the curriculum and so I tried to make the lessons without playing games, in order to save some time. But that was not so easy. The students had loved this playful form of learning and did not want to be transferred to any other form. As they said, these lessons were more fun and made them feel more creative and free, just like when they were playing music, so they did not want to change this. In fact, I think they lost their motivation, that is very important in learning and in musical performance (Sloboda and Davidson 1996).

### The Way to Succeed

Over time, however, the aforementioned difficulties were solved, with a better design of the gaming process (more fun and learning in less time). That was accomplished through a measured and aimed inclusion of the games in the basic activities of the annual educational planning. Actually, we played games that seemed random in the lesson, but they were not. After all, when the game loses the elements of freedom and spontaneity, it is not a game anymore. In this sample of students, I reduced game

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activities gradually during the years of their study, but I did not completely cut them off. The same students, even when they reached the age of 15, sometimes asked us to adapt a game to our lesson. I never refused, I made sure to balance the flow of the curricula in other ways and they were mature enough and did not often ask for it. But it was something they were looking for. It was like *food for learning*.

#### **Conclusion**

Finally, I have to mention the huge success of this particular way of learning: the love of these children for the music theory lesson. Whereas lots of students of other colleagues dropped out of music theory classes before or immediately after the compulsory years of study, my students found that lesson fun and useful. Another weird thing was that some students did not stop these lessons even when they stopped playing the music instrument they had chosen and they were still taking music theory lessons because they were having fun. I do not think it was only my way of teaching that accomplished that; I truly believe that the right use of the games in the teaching procedure was the tool to achieve these spectacular results. Through my experience, I can surely say that beyond the knowledge, the experiences and the skills that my students had acquired through this experiential, enjoyable and effective way, they also acquired a positive, alternative, creative and fun side of music theory. So, answering the original question, I would say with confidence: Yes, to games into the music class; but with intentional use (right time, place, lesson, duration, aim) in the educational process.

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