

What To Expect From NASAGA If You're New Like Me

By Jesse Laird

To be clear, from the outset I had no idea what to expect from NASAGA. I may as well have been landing in the DoubleTree parking lot aboard a flying saucer. All I knew was that someone I respected immensely told me I needed to be there. I am glad I listened.

A pre-conference workshop on Game Design, led by Brain Remer, Tracy Tagliati and Raja Thiagarajan, was expertly facilitated, imaginative and genuinely fun. I learned several new games before lunch and several games after. Now I know that next year, when I present the game I developed at the conference this year, I can expect to learn, laugh and meet new people.

My motivation in coming to the conference was to spend a little time with my mentor, Richard Powers, and meet more people interested in games and simulations. Mission accomplished: I got to know more than a dozen people who shared similar interests and professional goals. In retrospect, the sheer variety of people at the conference made this inevitable. I met people working in the nuclear power industry, disaster management, corporate training, psychology, consulting and academia. I met a librarian that broke all the stereotypes of that profession.

There were a variety of interesting sessions. I had been re-reading Albert Camus on the plane from Portland, so I was naturally drawn to Rich McLaughlin's session titled, "Experiencing Freedom and Accountability." We had a provocative discussion following a classic game. Richard Powers delivered a high quality experience, as usual, with his session on Unfair Games. Thiagi drew such a crowd to his Jolts session we spilled out into the hallway.

The Game Design Certificate program offered as part of the conference logically required participants to create a game as they worked their way through the conference. The game I created by myself was okay to begin with. However, on the last day of the conference I ran the idea by a table full of like-minded people. Within fifteen minutes the game had been improved so dramatically I thought to myself, "Wow! I may have something here!"

As a 2009 conference scholarship recipient, I thank you. I intend to repay the favor by presenting at the next NASAGA conference in Vancouver, B.C. in 2010. I have also talked a friend into coming with me, and because the conference is close to home, we will not need a spaceship to get there. See you next year!

Et in NASAGA ego!

By Camelia Crisan

I attended last year's Training Games Design Certification Program at the NASAGA Conference. It was a significant endeavor for me because I had to travel from the other side of the planet –from Bucharest, Romania to Vancouver, Canada! But what a great thing happened once I was there! I instantly felt that I was among my tribe. We spoke the same language, we had the same challenges, and we all wanted to be better at achieving learning objectives in the most creative and innovative way possible.

I started doing training design and re-shaping the form of training games to fit learning objectives almost 8 years ago. All my experience has been based on common sense, trial and error and a few books with tips and tricks. The fact that I met Tracy Tagliati, Brian Remer, and Raja Thiagarajan, the facilitators of the Game Design Certificate, and that I immersed myself completely in their knowledge and competence, was an eye opening experience.

Right before going to NASAGA, I was faced with one of the most challenging training designs I have ever had – a course on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). I wanted to put something together that would help participants understand and feel in an empathetic way the perspective of stakeholders for both analysis and management. I had several options in mind: case studies, role plays, and problem-solving – but none was powerful enough to allow for debate, reflection, negotiation, and putting participants in each other's shoes. It also had to be fun and culturally relevant. So many things to accomplish in only two hours!

Once at NASAGA, I learned the most interesting way to teach boring material through simple techniques without putting participants to sleep. I also learned how one can use table games, trivia questions, plastic animals, and magic in instructional design. To top it off, Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan showed us how you can put participants' creativity to work, or, as he said it better himself, "Let the lunatics run the asylum!"

The three days flew, literally, and after all those discussions and debates, there it was...my game, my precious! I had put together a table game with role plays and scripts and color codes for each stakeholder. I used pink and purple animals to be moved on a table according to the decisions that participants would make as a result of their negotiations. The objective of the game was to make sustainable business decisions based on situations where players were depending on the position expressed by different stakeholders. The script was based on real case stories. And like in the real world, businesses, their employees, communities and customers influence each other and can't be successful in the long term, unless they work together.

Andy Dunn of British Columbia Children's Hospital and a colleague from the Design Certificate program understood my approach and gave my English a helping hand, so I "baptized" my precious as "You're Off the Market!" It meant that those participants who made a series of bad decisions would be taken off of the board. However, they would be out of the market entirely, if we were in the real world.

After incorporating the feedback I received at NASAGA, I piloted the game in the CSR training course I delivered back in Romania. It was the last session of the course, when participants had to put into practice all the new stuff they learned about stakeholder management. It went GREAT! Yes, I had some logistical challenges. Yes, the participants needed a bit more time to understand the rules. And yes, the facilitator's presence was heavily required at the beginning. But then the game went as predicted. We had discussions, fireworks, negotiations... and a fight in one case! The most important aspect though, is that the game was mind blowing for them as evidenced by the feedback they provided at the end of the course.

I hope that Thiagi, Tracy, Brian, and Raja are proud. Not only because my game came to life at NASAGA thanks to their input, but because we all, as trainers and educators, are contributing to a better society, to welfare through education, and, in this particular case, to well-being and prosperity through games and fun.

Camelia Crisan is Training Manager for Biblionet, a non-profit organization dedicated to the revitalization of libraries across Romania.

First Time Attendee Gains International Professional Network, New Ideas, and Motivation

NASAGA was really helpful for me. It came at a time when I was a little stressed and I felt my creativity was drained in my current job. I felt I had exhausted all my support network in the workplace. The conference offered a release from the stress I was experiencing by allowing me to discuss the challenges I faced; get solutions from other training professionals; and build an international professional network of trainers. I learned from the other professionals that they faced similar issues whether they were consultants or worked for a private company. I shared my ideas with "NASAGA-ites" and they offered feedback on a daily basis. Really, NASAGA offered a place to generate and play with ideas with professional trainers from different industries. It also helped to build a social network of trainers from around the world that I can email, brainstorm with, share ideas, and provide assistance to. I left the conference rejuvenated and enthusiastic. For me, NASAGA was an investment in my future!

Brie
KUWAIT

Scholarship Winners Reflect on Their Experiences

Presenting and being able to attend the many sessions was a treat! It was wonderful to get feedback from experienced game designers and educators on the game we presented. The tips from the sessions I attended were fun, engaging, inspiring, and easy to adapt into my work. Because my focus is in developing online educational resources, the sessions on designing games, activities and simulations and learning more about game design principles made me consider another way to view the development process. I thoroughly enjoyed the presentations that touched on the concepts to captivate players and keep them engaged in the game, as well as incorporating jolts and using videos and images in storytelling. My take away is to figure out a way to translate the simulations/games concepts presented to us for use in group settings into online versions.... It's a good challenge for me to find different ways to deliver online content.

Additionally, having a number of other staff members from the same agency attend was an added benefit. It was difficult to decide which of the many interesting sessions to attend, so we split off to different sessions and met up later to swap notes. It was great!

Thank you for organizing an inspiring and fun conference!

Melissa Morales

I walked away from the NASAGA Conference with numerous games, ideas, and a whole lot of inspiration. Marla's session reminded me laughter is contagious and is good for the bottom line. Josh's workshop challenged me to think about the kinds of questions I ask and what these questions say about who I am as a person. His hand-held video camera was pretty cool, too; I've added one to my Christmas wish list. Playing Wi\$eMoney on game night inspired me to invest in a Suzie Orman book on financial literacy. Thiago kept me laughing and smiling throughout the facilitator's workshop and various sessions while keeping his mouth shut (most of the time). Julia reminded me how powerful images can be when revealing your stories. The Peace Corps gang had me considering what it would be like if I signed up for a 2-year stint. Sandy inspired me to speak my truth again in her workshop on creating a space for the soul. With all these experiences and a facilitation certificate, I'm ready to take on the training world!

Bigger than any specific session or reception was the warmth, openness, and genuine connections I made with people at the conference. Qualities like these are found in people who live life to the fullest and make an effort to see the potential in the people and projects around them. I'm inspired to finish the haiku I began in Julia's session about my experience at NASAGA:

Laughter, games, and fun
NASAGA inspires all
Play, learn, reflection

Thank you again to all who made it possible for me to attend the NASAGA conference this year. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity.

Christina Hyde

Scholarship Winners Reflect on Their Experiences (continued)

It has been three weeks since the NASAGA 2009 conference and just this week alone I have received an email or Facebook message from 11 NASAGA attendees. I say this because it is important to realize and share that what happens at NASAGA is far beyond networking-- I made friends, friends who happen to enjoy playing games, sharing music, sharing jokes, and occasionally sharing some professional advice. For someone who is still in that odd young adult stage of life where you are trying to find a balance between the kid that you still want to be and the responsible adult that you think you're supposed to be, this was a wonderful--I dare say life changing-- opportunity. That being said I'd like to share with you **the top 10 things I learned at NASAGA;**

1. It is ok to play games and be silly; in fact it's better than being serious and exceedingly professional.
2. You really can make a living doing something you love--playing, teaching and making games!
3. There even are names for such things: instructional design, game designer, interactive learning coordinator....
4. Brilliant and exciting people can be "excessively happy," or a bit misanthropic, as long as they still know how to enjoy fun!
5. Repeating Sivasailam Thiagarajan out loud before speaking is a tremendous mental and vocal warm up.
6. Caution should be taken when performing the above as passersby tend to think you are hexing them.
7. Being successful doesn't require you to hide your inner-child; you're much more endearing when you don't.
8. Marketing yourself is not about your ability to eloquently list off all of your many qualifications and accomplishments, but rather to grab your listener's attention and tell them how you can make their life better. This is also a great way to make friends and genuinely learn about and show interest in others.
9. There are many, many people in this world who are amazingly talented, have awesome ideas, are from all different backgrounds and have many valuable approaches, ideas, and insights....and they love interactive learning!
10. I'm going to Vancouver next year!

So, to summarize my experience at NASAGA as a whole I will quote one of my brilliant teacher's games and say, "It opened my eyes, turned me around completely, and touched my heart." I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to attend and I can't wait for next year!

Shannon Mason