

Speculation, Intention, and Imagined Lives: Design Drawing Games and Qualitative Research

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There is the problem, classic among thieves, of how to divide the loot. If the Coalition can earn more than the total the individuals can earn by playing independently, how should the excess be divided? Or, what system of side-payments should be made among the players to ensure that the Coalition will prosper—that its income will be high and the members loyal? When will a player accept a less favorable payoff in order to penalize the other player?

—J. D. Williams, *The Compleat Strategyst* (1954)

In the introductory paragraphs of his seminal essay on drawing, “The Necessity for Drawing: Tangible Speculation,” the late Michael Graves describes a game reminiscent of the Surrealists’ *Exquisite Corpse*, a “conversation through drawing” where participants take turns developing a plan drawing based on a “commonly held, but never made explicit” set of guidelines (Graves, 1977). The result—in multivalent marks on paper—includes proposals for ordering devices and systems, interpretative fragments, and dichotomies of completion/incompletion and passage/rest. The guidelines of the drawing game support the give-and-take, the ebb and flow, of the exchange as a kind of purposeful graphic conversation as well as a partnership. Underscoring the speculative nature of the collaboration is the need to maintain an ambiguity of scale that, for Graves, allows the work-in-progress to be simultaneously understood as the plan of “a room, a building, or a town plan.” So long as the drawing can support multiple interpretations, there is the possibility of exploring a multitude of What-if questions but, once the ambiguity of the drawing is lost, the game is over.

This is a game that can be played on a sheet of paper at a faculty meeting or on a bar napkin at a local watering hole. Time limits are set by the participants. It is play with no clear winner, though the clear loser is he or she whose contribution to the drawing substitutes clarity and precision for ambiguity. The successful collaboration is the one that fosters experimentation, speculation, and explores opportunities through many rounds; it is a body of work, a series of studies, that yields unexpected results and provocative discoveries. Audacity and cleverness are often, but not always, rewarded in the drawing game. Risk taking is not only rewarded but encouraged; not surprisingly, high-risk moves early in the

game can be diluted or reinforced in subsequent rounds. And, unlike those zero-sum games where strategies can be formulated, tested, and analyzed, the pleasure derived from the drawing game is often of a gauntlet-thrown-down variety.

But if the drawing game eschews the complex probability strategies of blackjack and five-card stud, the incremental positioning of chess pieces that comprise the Semi-Slav Defense, or the hyper rationalism of backgammon’s dynamic move-option evaluation at the beginning of each round, then what are the approaches most likely to result in successful—some might say optimal—design play? Rather than adopting a consistent and linear strategy associated with zero-sum games, the drawing game necessitates a dynamic, non-linear, and interpretative/contextual approach.

Useful insights into the differences between linear and nonlinear approaches to play are offered by the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. While a quantitative approach is characterized by the testing of one or more hypotheses via the structured use of mathematical and statistical tools, qualitative research considers “the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and description of things” (Berg & Lune, 3). It is viewed as a scientific method of observation, one often concerned with question of why and how rather than who, what, or when. The drawing game, as a kind of qualitative research activity, is concerned with characteristics, organizational patterns, process, and speculation on the possibilities for transformation and further development.

But, if the aim of the qualitative researcher is an articulate, rich, and insightful work of interpretation, a number of difficult questions arise. How, for example, does an interpretive process that might lead, on the one hand, to the qualitative research equivalent of Picasso’s sublime *Bull’s Head* (1942) result, on the other hand, to the forgettable ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture and observation tower constructed for the 2012 London Olympics?

In their commentary on the paradigm wars that dominated qualitative research in the second half of the 20th century, Denzin and Lincoln describe the qualitative researcher as a bricoleur, one who constructs “a pieced-together set of representations...fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 4). The authors observe that the intensely interpretive work of the bricoleur includes “an aes-thetics of



Figures 1, 2, and 3: The Drawing Game. Credit: Author

representation that goes beyond the pragmatic or the practical” and the development of a focused image that makes visible what was previously invisible or obscured. Weinstein and Weinstein add that the “solution (bricolage) which is the result of the bricoleur’s method is an [emergent] construction” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 161).

Graves essay underscores the notion that architectural design, to the degree that it is situational, complex, interpretive, and demands full consideration of an aesthetics of representation that goes beyond the merely pragmatic, also relies on bricolage. The extent that architectural design, a non-linear process, shares affinities with play, rule-making, and rule-breaking, does not rely on hypothesis testing but, rather, on the ability of the designer to invent, synthesize, and offer informed commentary on the potential of a situation or condition.

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