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Improv's Babel: Defining the Game of the Scene

By Erik Voss

Interviews by Matt Visconage.

Improv was doomed with a semantics crisis from the start.

When long-form improvisation began to flourish as its own art form under comedy guru Del Close in Chicago in the 1980s, “improv” referred to The Improv, a popular chain of stand-up comedy clubs in dozens of cities around the country. The Palm Beach Improv, for example.

When I used to intern at an improv theater in Hollywood, it wasn’t uncommon to find a couple who wandered in from the street, expecting to see a guy with a microphone, telling jokes. Television shows like *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* helped audiences distinguish improv from stand-up, but the games on those shows gave the wrong impression of the style of improvisation taught by Close and now performed in hundreds of theaters worldwide.

At the heart of this confusion is that sticky term: *game*. Game can refer to *short-form games* like “Party Quirks” or “Freeze Tag.” There are also *group games*, which are a component of the Harold – a long-form show created by Close – that involves the entire ensemble, as opposed to two-person scenes. Finally, there is the *game of the scene*, a technical term with various definitions depending on who you ask.

Splitsider did just that. We spoke with teachers from the top improv training centers in the country – the Upright Citizens Brigade, the Improv Olympic (iO), the Second City, the Annoyance – in hopes to reconcile these competing views of game. After some deeply inside-baseball conversations, we realized the perceived differences between these different theaters have less to do with style or philosophy than they do with pure semantics.

From the wide spectrum of opinions emerge two fundamental definitions of game, based mostly on its relative importance to the scene. The first definition is associated with the

improv community of Chicago, and the second is associated with the community that it birthed, the UCB.

1. The game is any pattern that emerges within a scene that the improvisers may follow while exploring the relationship between the characters.

The Chicago improv scene is so vast and diverse that any attempt to characterize its style seems immediately reductive. There exists some common ground, thanks to the universal appeal of Del Close: agreement, the value of real, human relationships, etc. The definition of *game*, meanwhile, is less clear. Most teachers have settled on the notion that a game is any pattern within a scene – meaning to many, it is inherently optional, and therefore secondary to playing real, honest relationships.

(Note: The following statements were not made on behalf of any particular training center or the city's improv community as a whole, but rather the speaker's personal views.)

TJ JAGODOWSKI: Not every scene needs a game. It's absolutely possible for there to be a fantastic scene that has no semblance of a game. The purpose of a scene is to show the unique interaction between the people on stage at that specific moment in time as it relates to the world in general or the piece in particular.

GREG HESS: Chicago is known for defining the two-person relationship scene, going back with Del and even further with Second City and all of that. So I think that when we [Cook County Social Club] teach game we first go for that real simple approach, ... then we go back a lot of times and address the two person relationship scene again, so making sure that those scenes are very strong and making sure that people know how to play with a lot of truth and emotional heightening and raising stakes in their scenes. And then we tend to add game back on top of that so that the discussion becomes a little bit more, "How do you continue to do a good relationship scene when you're also finding these patterns within the relationship?"

SUSAN MESSING: The *game of the scene* is a fucking misnomer. Finding *the game* annoys the fuck out of me. That sounds like there was a game there and we were too stupid to find it. The games of the scene are anything you do more than once that become characteristics or facts. You have a game for you that no one can take away – could be a character or physical trait – but it's something that you visit again and again to show that is something that is inherent to you, something you always do.

MARK RATERMAN: It might be time to change up what we're talking about to just let the name *game* die and redefine it. Just say we're looking for funny patterns.

JOE BILL: In the simplest form, I love the way that Mick Napier puts it: "I wanna see that improviser do *that* more."

JIMMY CARRANE: I had a student the other day in class, and in the scene she was watching TV and was not paying attention to her husband as he was putting away the groceries. It was a simple game and played so real that you thought you were watching a play. This happens between me and my wife all the time. That is the best kind of game, a pattern of behavior we recognize from our own lives. It's universal.

GREG HESS: We tend to say, "Learn game so that you can have this other tool. Use it as a tool, rather than just a rule."

JOE BILL: A game always exists, whether the improvisers in it are aware of it or not. ... This really begs the question: if the improvisers in the scene aren't mutually conscious of the game of the scene, then can there still be a game of the scene? We should ask Deepak Chopra.

2. The game is the single pattern of unusual behavior that defines the scene.

The founders of the Upright Citizens Brigade – Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh, and Amy Poehler – studied improv in Chicago before creating their own training center in New York. One of their goals was to standardize the language of improvisation, with a more narrowly tailored definition of *game* as a pillar of their philosophy. The UCB definition pertains to the scene as a whole, not merely a pattern within it.

MATT BESSER: The game is the scene. When I hear people say, "The game's just part of the scene," or "You may or may not have a game," to me, that is ridiculous. That's absurd.

WILL HINES: [The game is] a consistent pattern of behavior that breaks from the everyday pattern of behavior. The reason we say that is we want games that are based on an unusual thing, something that's different from reality, that repeats in a consistent way. That's our mathematical way.

KEVIN MULLANEY: For me game of the scene is a metaphor: Games have rules, and so can scenes. It's up to the players to figure out those rules as the scene develops. The rules can be

ways in which the characters behave or react, patterns to the way they think, or rules governing the situation or even the world in which the scene exists.

WILL HINES: I've always thought that the UCB, themselves – Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh, Amy Poehler – those guys, when they set up this school were reacting to improv that they didn't like in Chicago. They liked a lot of improv in Chicago, but the kind they liked was aggressive, had a point, got there quickly kind of style. That's the way they do improv. So, they wanted to create a school that put a priority on making a comedic point and getting there. They set it up very deliberately.

MATT BESSER: Well, not a response. We took what we liked from Chicago and tried to hone it into something that we could all agree on. Also I think the more we did improv the more we understood it and how it worked.

WILL HINES: We believe that every scene should have a game, ideally. We know it's not always gonna work out that way, but that's what we're putting the focus on when we do scenes. We like the word "unusual" here, that's what we've ended on to determine if something is funny. As opposed to emotional or behavior – even though you might have a game that's expressed through someone's emotions or someone's behavior – we wanted terms that were really independent of any circumstance.

MATT BESSER: We always compare our scenes to sketch comedy because we believe a great improvised scene is something that you can write out and it's a great sketch. And if you look at great sketches, they're not all over the place. ... It's all about one thing.

KEVIN MULLANEY: I'm not attracted to the idea that we are doing improvised sketch comedy. It's fine if people want to approach it that way, but I prefer to think of it as improvised theater, which is usually funny, and hopefully always entertaining.

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Obviously there are some key differences between UCB-style improv and Chicago-style improv, and it's not really worth trying to reconcile all approaches to long-form improvisation under one big tent. That said, there is no denying that much of the confusion over game stems more from a disagreement on semantics than one of philosophy. It's not as if one wing refuses to acknowledge game in scenes while the other is slave to it. The tribes have similar goals, just different dialects. Perhaps what is "game" to some is simply "relationship" to others, for example.

It is a shame that Del Close didn't live long enough to see UCB become the dominant voice in the improv community that it is today; perhaps then we would have universally revered authority to restore a common language. In the meantime, our best hope is to seek to better understand each other, by visiting and taking classes at other theaters, networking at improv festivals, reading blogs, listening to podcasts, and just keeping an open mind about this time-consuming, costly, wonderful distraction.

Or better yet, let's just wait for the UCB to finish that book. That oughta clear things up, right?

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