

AN ORGANIZATIONAL-ACTIVITY GAME IN THE SOVIET UNION:

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF AN AMERICAN PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER

by

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It is by no means an easy task to distill into a few short pages what has been for me one of the most intellectually insightful, psychologically stimulating, and emotionally challenging experiences of my life: namely, the period from November 25 through December 2, 1989, when another American, Ms. Connie Miller, and I became the first non-Soviets ever to participate in an "organizatsionno-deyatelnostnaya igra" (literally translated as "organizational-activity game") in the Soviet Union. The theme of this game was titled: "Analysis of the Prospective Development of the Orenburg Region under the Conditions of Self-Management and Self-Financing." At one level this theme is indeed an accurate description of the game's theme and structure; but, as I was to discover, the "igra" (game) has many levels. One almost has to use a stream of consciousness style to even begin to convey the impact of being a participant in such an organizational-activity game; but for the most part, this approach will have to await my more in-depth efforts to explore the role of Soviet non-governmental organizations (or NGOs) in engendering social and economic change. Despite doing all of my graduate work in California "in the sixties," I had somehow managed to miss completely the various "EST", "Lifespring", and general encounter-group phenomena and human-potential movement of the time. How ironic that a veteran of southern California and Berkeley would first come into contact with some aspects and techniques unknowingly adopted from these group-process activities combined with very real, practical business-simulation game themes in the Soviet Union!

I have come to think that something more akin to Jungian "synchronicity" than mere serendipity led to a reuniting of Andrei Mrost, an old Soviet friend from Moscow and fellow geographer, and myself in Seattle in October 1989. We had lost touch since 1976 and when we met again it was as though we both instantly realized we were in the presence of our alter egos, a feeling which was to be constantly with us during our late night discussions during the game, and our car journey to the old Russian cities of Suzdal and Vladimir, and our all-night train sojourns to Riga, Leningrad, and back to Moscow after the game. The game was over, but we were still "in the game" and undoubtedly appeared to others to be more than a little obtuse, obtrusive, and obsessive about our recent intense eight-day "igra" experience. The game took place at a Young Pioneer Camp about an hour's drive south of Orenburg in the wind-blown Russian steppes about two and one-half hours by jet east of Moscow.

Like myself, Andrei had been studying the environmental problems of the Soviet Union, but from the "inside" as an employee of the former Soviet Ministry of Land

Reclamation and Water Management, a ministry deserving of all of the worst stereotypes of our U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In Andrei's words, "If you don't need a dam built, then, of course, my Ministry will oblige you by building two of them which you don't need and don't want and be rewarded handsomely for over-fulfilling its plan!" In October 1988, as part of his official work at the Ministry, he had been sent to attend an "igra" in Irkutsk in East Siberia. The theme of this game, conducted by Sergei Popov of the Moscow Methodological Circle and the Interregional Methodological Association of the Soviet Union, was: "Analiz perspektiv khozyaystvennoy deyatel'nosti i razrabotka podkhodov k izmeneniyu ekologicheskoy situatsii v regione oz. Baykal" ("Analysis of the Prospective Economic Activities and Elaboration of Approaches to Changes in the Ecological Situation in the Region of Lake Baykal"). Andrei kept talking about the game and its leader, Popov, whom Andrei considered to be the "first real teacher" he had met in his life, truly a brilliant, driven, renaissance man with seemingly boundless energy and insights.

At first, I thought Andrei was just telling me about the game because he was aware that my very first professional publication dealt with the water pollution threats to Lake Baykal, the so-called shining jewel of Siberia. Soon after his return to Moscow I was to learn otherwise. I received a fax invitation and phone call from Andrei urging me to attend a game which was to be played in Orenburg in little over a month's time. Quickly videotaping some of my lectures and rearranging other parts of my schedule, I left for Moscow on November 22 for what was to be a truly fascinating experience. Arriving in Orenburg after midnight on a cold windy Saturday night, Connie, Andrei, Yuri (a young landscape architect from Leningrad) and I were driven for about an hour by microbus south of Orenburg across the Ural River which separates Europe from Asia to the Young Pioneer Camp which was to be our home for the next eight days. Popov was waiting to meet us and had food prepared for us. Apparently it had not been easy for Andrei to convince Popov of any possible value in having two Americans participate in his game. I was exhausted, but my first impression of Popov was not how I had pictured him from Andrei's description. He seemed to be too young, and somehow too tall, slender, and unassuming to be the brilliant teacher and thinker Andrei had portrayed him as.

During the next few days, my assessments of Popov ranged all over the place, as they did, I am quite sure, for my fellow game participants. In the first few days of the game his use of confrontational techniques made me think of him as cruel and arrogant. His first late night extemporaneous three-hour-long dialog into the nuances of "methodology", with Pyotr Shchedrovitskiy, a young philosopher, film maker, fellow "metodolog" ("methodologist", in fact, son of the founder of the Moscow Methodological Circle), and a wide-ranging facile speaker, at first left the feeling that they both were elitist cult figures. By the end of the "igra", however, they had clearly earned my respect as individuals possessing a number of intellectual gifts who were trying very hard in their own way to "civilize their country" and to facilitate fundamental reform. I saw them as patriots in the best sense of the word, struggling to transform their society into a more humane one. While my assessments of them evolved during the game, at no point was their intellectual acumen in doubt. During the course of the game the leader, Sergei Popov, a self-proclaimed "methodologist" (and

mathematical oceanographer by formal training at one of the Soviet Union's most prestigious science and engineering institutes), kept alluding to the "Soviet system" as a "sticky tape" onto which all individual members of Soviet society had "become stuck."

This "sticky tape" was everywhere (I wondered if this was the Soviet version of what we call "red tape;" but, perhaps, "fly paper" is the better metaphor) and once stuck, it was very difficult for an individual to escape. The tape supposedly drained Soviet peoples of their individuality, their initiative, their ability to articulate their values and interests, their self-esteem, and their capacity for individual as well as collective innovative problem solving and decision-making. In other words, the "system" made them into "risk avoiding automatons". Thus, this game was about much more than simply what its theme denoted. For instance, to address the theme of the game, the "methodologists" argued bluntly and directly that all of the various psychological and even emotional implications of the "sticky tape" phenomena would have to be addressed first. The players of the game would have to strip away the "public masks" that they have subconsciously learned to wear so well since childhood. Midway through the game, I introduced an alternative metaphor for the "sticky tape" phenomena, a "fractal," those mathematically simple and graphically beautiful infinitely recursive self-replicating patterns which seemingly effortlessly clone themselves all over computer screens at ever smaller and smaller scales. Popov beamed his approval. I wondered at first, are the game leaders not aware of the Western concept of "socialization processes" which all societies have?

Soon, however, I learned that the game's leaders, in effect, were claiming that both a different socialization process and re-socialization process are necessary. Even from his first speech, Popov provoked the game's participants to introspect about who they are, what are their values and goals, and how and why they perpetuate the "sticky tape" in their daily lives. He goaded them with assertions that "...Soviet people are merely sheep without souls, afraid to find their own pasture." As I am writing this I recall the multitude of times during the "igra" and in my more than twenty years of professional experience in Soviet studies that these themes about the Russian character have appeared in famous Russian anecdotes and in my day to day experiences in the Soviet Union. In his new book, Hedrick Smith claims that "(B)efore he can reform the economy, Gorbachev must purge his country of its inbred escapism, lethargy and envy."¹ Smith cites one of the plethora of Russian anecdotes which drives home Popov's point about the lack of Soviet entrepreneurship in the general sense of risk-taking or even trying something new. "Remember, the tallest blade of grass is the first to be cut down by the scythe. Lesson: Do not try to stand above the crowd, the collective."²

Popov's "game" was a very serious endeavor with arduous tasks. Indeed, I was to learn later that the very use of the word "igra" ("game") was a deliberate choice so as to minimize the potential interest and attention such activities might have for certain "Soviet authorities" when such games were first conducted about ten years ago. An initial question for me was, who sponsors such games ("igri") and why, who are the players, what are the games' techniques, and what are the games' concrete objectives? This game was sponsored by the Executive Committee of the Orenburg Oblast and the Orenburg Oblast Committee of the Communist Party. What would motivate the local

Communist Party power structure to sponsor such a game when many of the ideas and emotions expressed in the game were extremely hostile to the Party and its function in the region? Perhaps we in the West really did not realize how thin was the Soviet Union's ideological allegiance to Communism. Since the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was the only avenue available to upward mobility professionally, there was a strong incentive to become an active member regardless of the individual's true thoughts.

Perhaps more important now is the fact that glasnost' is very real and far advanced. These organizational-activity games merely help spread glasnost' into everyday life. Finally, local authorities are supposed to be converting to "self-management" and "self-financing". We spent much of the first two days of the game discovering that nobody really knows what these twin concepts are to mean operationally. Accordingly, officials are rather desperate "to do something." Ironically, sponsoring such an "igra" may fit the old pattern of "cooking the books" by appearing to do something innovative to further perestroika. However, Popov and Shchedrovitskiy's games have yielded some innovative and concrete results. For example, workers actually selected their new factory manager at the Riga Automobile Factory within the context of one of these games. It was held between January 22-30, 1987, in Yelgava located about 40 kilometers from Riga. New stock-holding, joint-venture organizational firms between private co-ops and state enterprises were formed after a previous recent game played in Orenburg.

As previously mentioned, the "producer" of this game was the Moscow Methodological Circle and the Interregional Methodological Association of which Popov is a leader. Essentially, Popov's games are a private enterprise activity paid for in this case by the coffers of the local Party, industrial enterprises, and governments in Orenburg Oblast. Popov, in turn, employs and pays the salaries of several, mostly young, highly educated professionals from a variety of physical, biological and social science backgrounds who function as small-group game facilitators or "igrotekhniki" (literally, "game-technicians") and a few apprentice "metodologi" (so-called, "methodologists"). Many of the "igrotekhniki" also have other jobs, but many work only as "igrotekhniki," usually working in about one game per month.

Who were the 160 or so participants? About 120 of them were Party members, elected officials, plant managers, planners, professionals, ministry officials, some workers and even active members of the "Green Movement." Other NGOs were notified but did not send representatives to the game. In a real sense, the participants represented a microcosm of the Orenburg region, biased towards the regional decision-making power structure. In addition, there were about 40 other participants representing similar organizations from all over the Slavic, Transcaucasus, and Baltic Republics. And, of course, there were the two American "interlopers." In essence the game was structured as follows. The mornings were spent in small groups in the process called "reflective analysis of the situation in the game." After lunch and often until after 10:00-PM plenary sessions were held, with group reports on the theme of the day being presented by a different representative of each small group. Popov and Shchedrovitskiy and the other "metodologi" were very confrontational during these plenary sessions, producing some absolutely fascinating and highly charged exchanges. The first day Popov said

prophetically that "...in two days you will want to kill me because I will try to force you to remove the mask you hide behind in your everyday life."

After an initial welcome, we were given a very detailed oral and written briefing about the conditions in the region from a number of perspectives. Popov then presented an opening lecture on the "Goals and Objectives of the Game." With hindsight, one realizes just how candid he was, but during his presentation it was somewhat nebulous. He told us what the objectives were and how we were to go about it, but he made us discover both individually and in the small groups what our agendas were. In other words, he was very effective in getting the players to do their own work. Perhaps the most fundamental task of the game was to facilitate the players' individual and collective abilities to "self-determine." Although a preliminary list of possible working groups was given out, from the very beginning we were all free to join whatever group we wished, or to form our own group. I was invited to join the "Co-op" group which "self-determined" from the first day. I participated in the "Co-op" groups (they split into small groups from time to time to discuss particular themes such as joint-ventures with foreign firms or establishing legal guidelines for fostering their movement) part of the time, but spent most of my morning small-group "reflection" period with the group of economists or sometimes alone with my own "igrotekhnika" reflecting on what I could gain and take back with me to my profession from this unique experience.

Sleep-deprivation was a deliberate technique. The accompanying appendix, which provides more complete information about the structure and schedule of the game, conceals the fact that the game's daily regime in fact usually continued well past 2 A.M. and the loudspeakers awakened us promptly at 7:30 A.M. The attached appendix lists the preliminary composition of the working groups and the program, the regime, and the daily themes of the game. Most of the appendix's items are self-explanatory; what is missing are the highlights of the significant cathartic moments and turning points in the game. As a result of the work both in the small groups and plenary sessions on the themes of the first two days--namely, "Conditions of the Region and the Possibility of Its Development," and "Critical Analysis of the Approaches to the Problems of Development in the Oblast"--two processes rapidly evolved. First, we were forced to carefully consider the words we were using. Individually and collectively we quickly discovered that often there were no shared understandings of words and concepts.

Upon closer inspection, such central phrases as "self-management" and "self-financing" were revealed as rather meaningless non-operational slogans of the perestroika campaign. I was met with applause and rounds of laughter when I offered my observation that I was a member of several American co-ops, but that "...American co-ops are different than Soviet kooperativy because American ones usually have some 'socialistic content' to them while in the Soviet Union they are purely private enterprise business partnerships." Of course, other participants such as orthodox Communists saw this as an excellent opportunity to denounce the entire "kooperativnoye movement". Animated exchanges about the meaning of communism and capitalism ended in laughter and applause when I rose from the floor and said, "It seems to me from the discussion here that under capitalism we have exploitation of man by man while under

communism it is just the opposite." Concomitantly with these energized debates about the daily themes of the game, the players one by one were confronted with the reality of their daily lives in new ways.

For most participants this personal introspection/awareness process seemed to move through all five of Kubler-Ross' stages of grief: denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and finally, acceptance. The most poignant turning point in the game came on the second day during a heated exchange between Popov and the young leader of the Orenburg Komsomol (Young Communist League). Earlier in the day at the Plenary Session Connie Miller had spoken about personal values, asking the Orenburg participants to inform her about what they valued in their region. Their eyes and ears were riveted on her simple request which seemed to astonish them and touch them deeply. During the same Plenary Session, this young man had presented a very candid and depressing assessment of the problems of agricultural development in the region. Now, late in the evening, Popov was provoking the players with his comments that the new Congress of Peoples Deputies was a ridiculous circus and charade. Speaking from his heart this man, who was a newly elected member of the Congress, vehemently defended it. Calmly, Popov replied, "You know when you spoke this afternoon, I thought, now there is a brave man, but a kamikaze." Popov had clearly identified this man as one of those "tall blades of grass" previously mentioned. There was a hushed silence and as if on command almost every single player bowed his or her head. It was in that cathartic moment when all seemed to recognize their own public masks, their own sense of shame for not acting on their values, and their collective sense of despair about their complicity with "the system." After a long follow-up speech, Popov officially disbanded all the groups and told the players "...you are now ready to genuinely 'self-determine' your own groups..." for the rest of the game. Late into the night people were caucusing, disbanding their old groups, reconstituting their old groups, and forming new groups. From this point on clearly the participants and groups who were best able to articulate their own values, wants, and desires, or in the words of the metodologi to "self-activate", were the "winners" in the game. Beyond any question these were the members of the "kooperativnyy movement." But, they were not alone. For example, it was fascinating to watch the rapid evolution of the words and diagrams by an urban architect who told me privately that for the first time in his life he felt like he was able to function as a professional architect. This game did not have the usual "toasts and banquets" regime, which had been a staple part of all of my previous official Soviet visits; but there were two banquets. The second banquet was hosted by the leader of the "kooperativnyy" movement, a very savvy and articulate man of some fifty years by the name of Guryevich. It took place on the last night after the "igra" had officially ended and the postmortem final "reflection session," in which I spoke at length about such things as, the functioning of markets, common property problems, property rights, organizational forms of agriculture, and so on, was finished. More emotionally charged, however, was the first banquet. Beginning at 10:30 P.M. on next to the last night of the game, the local Communist Party sponsors put on a lavish feast for about twenty of us, including Popov and Shchedrovitskiy. Shchedrovitskiy's toast at this affair provided the most provocative moment of the entire eight days. A striking figure with piercing blue eyes, perfect intonation and a commanding presence, Shchedrovitskiy rose and with his eyes fixed on mine the whole time very slowly and

deliberately spoke these words: "If we are successful in civilizing this country events like this will be rare in the future. I don't mean to insult our hosts this evening, the Communist Party of Orenburg, but we are not here by any process of self-determination. We are here because of the roles we play in this region or in this game. And one of my roles is thus to propose a toast. So I propose a toast to humor, to the humor of the Soviet people. It is our one strength in the face of our hopelessness, our despair, and the hopelessness of the system we live under."

Tears welled up in my eyes and inaudibly with my lips I mouthed to him the Russian words "ya ponyal" ("I understood"). He gently nodded his head indicating that he in turn had understood me. Could such a toast have been spoken by anyone but a self-destructive madman even a couple of years ago? I think not! The next morning he came and spoke with me some more about his feelings for his motherland. One had such high hopes about the possibility of real change in the Soviet Union while participating in the "igra" and seeing the tremendous changes in peoples' modes of thinking and acting in this time-warped microcosm of society way out in the snowy wind-swept steppes of the Soviet heartland. The reality of the magnitude of the problems which need to be addressed, unfortunately, was soon brought home as we returned to the city of Orenburg, with its beautiful pre-revolutionary buildings surrounded by the monolithic prisms of Soviet architectural realism. A visit to the Orenburg museum commemorating Pugachev, the famous peasant leader of the late Eighteenth Century serf revolt in the Orenburg region, rather profoundly made me realize the gargantuan tasks for Gorbachev and such driven people as Popov and Shchedrovitskiy to overcome in their own ways the tragic legacy of centuries of painful suffering in Russia. I thanked Popov for providing me with the unique opportunity to try to crawl inside the Soviet/Russian soul and view the Soviet Union from inside. Previously, I had known the country and her peoples only through the eyes of an observer. This new vision, I believe, will not fade away very quickly nor easily. Popov, it seems, made me do some real "rabota" (work).

APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONAL-ACTIVITY GAME ON THE THEME: "ANALYSIS OF THE PERSPECTIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORENBURG REGION UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF SELF-MANAGEMENT AND SELF-FINANCING

Dates:

25 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER, 1989

THE LOCATIONS AND SETTING:

A Young Pioneer Camp about 1 hour south of Orenburg in the southern Urals'
region of the Soviet Union

THE CREDITS

Sponsors:

The Executive Committee of the Orenburg Oblast & Orenburg Oblast Committee of the Communist Party

Producers:

Moscow Methodological Circle & The Interregional Methodological Association

Leader of the Game:

Sergei V. Popov

Metodolog of the Game:

Pyotr G. Shchedrovitskiy

Assistant Game Leaders:

B. Ostrovskiy R. G. Shaykhutdinov T. N. Sergeytsev

Supporting Cast:

About 40 "igrotekhniki" from all over the USSR

The Players:

About 120 Party members, elected officials, managers, planners, professionals, ministry officials, etc. from
Orenburg Region

About 40 Party members, elected officials, managers, planners, professionals, ministry officials, etc. from
other regions of the USSR

And, two Americans, Connie Miller - environmental mediation specialist and Craig ZumBrunnen -
geographer

PRELIMINARY COMPOSITION OF WORKING GROUPS

I. Management Groups

Organs of the Oblast Government Management Responsible for Life in the Region (transport, trade,
services, public health, education, industry and agriculture, etc...)

Representatives of Orenburg Oblast Industrial Enterprises

Representatives of Agriculture in Orenburg

Representatives of Cultural Life in Orenburg

Representatives of Social Organizations

Representatives of Orenburg Inhabitants

II. Professional Groups

Planners

Ecologists

Historians

Urban Planners

Sociologists

Economic Geographers

Architects

Physicians

Agricultural Specialists

Administrators

Economists

Gas Industry Specialists

Chemists

III. Thematic Groups

Planning of Regional Systems

Economic Organization of the Region

Possible and Perspective Development of the Region

Restructuring of the Regional Infrastructure

Resources of the Region and Their Movement

The Region as a Cultural Entity

Historical Analysis of the Formation of the Region

Management of Regional Systems

IV. Expert Groups for:

Regionalization

Economization

Infrastructure

Organizational Resources

Planning and Programming of Regional Systems

Management

Ecology

Urbanization

V. Methodological Groups (Metodologicheskoye gruppy)

PROGRAM AND REGIME OF THE GAME

25 November

10:00 - 11:00 Opening Session, Welcome by Oblast Leaders

11:00 - 12:30 Opening Lecture by the Game Leader (Popov): "Goals and Objectives of the Game, Organization of the Work, Principal Problems."

12:30 - 13:00 Distribution by Groups

13:00 - 14:00 Lunch

- 14:00 - 17:00 Work in Groups: Self-determination of Participants in the Game, analysis of the plan and program of the game, generation of the goals of the game and of the players. Preparation of reports on the theme: "Conditions of the Region and the Possibility of its Development."
17:00 - 19:00 Plenary Session: Reports by groups on the theme of the day and general discussion.
19:00 - 20:00 Dinner
20:00 - 22:00 Igrotekhnicheskaya konsul'tatsiya (Facilitator's Consultation): "Principles of Organizing Collective Mental Activity."

26 November - 1 December

- 8:30 - 10:00 Breakfast
10:00 - 13:00 Work in Groups: Reflective analysis of the Situation in the Game. Preparation of reports on the theme of the day.
13:00 - 14:00 Lunch
14:00 - 17:00 Plenary Session: Group reports on the theme of the day and general discussion.
17:00 - 17:30 Break
17:30 - 19:00 Plenary Session: Speeches by experts and methodological groups.
19:00 - 20:00 Dinner
20:00 - 22:00 Consultations (optional)
22:00 - 24:00 Reflections of igrotekhnikov

2 December

- 10:00 - 13:00 Work in Groups on the Isolation of the Main Problems in the Region and Paths for Solving Them.
13:00 - 14:00 Lunch
14:00 - 18:00 Plenary Session: Presentation of Final Group Reports.
18:00 - 19:00 Reflections on the Course and Results of the Game. Individual Statements by Participants. Closing Words by the Game Leader, Popov.

3 December Departure of Game Participants

4 - 9 December Seminar of Experts

THEMES by DAY

26 November

Critical Analysis of the Approaches to the Problems of Development in the Oblast.

27 November

Speculations about the Regional Situation.

28 November

Analysis of the Regional Situation.

29 November

Isolation of the Conditions Necessary for the Formation of the Region as a "Self-Activating" Economic Entity.

30 November

Isolation of the Necessary Conditions for the Formation of the Region as a "Self-Activating" Socio-Cultural Entity.

1 December

Construction of Variants of the Possible Formation of the Region: Isolation of Man-made Technical and Natural Components.

2 December

Isolation of the Main Problems in the Region and Paths for Solving Them.

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Библиотека

- * Публикации Г.П. Щедровицкого
- * Тексты участников ММК
- * Тематический каталог
- * Архив семинаров
- * Архив Чтений памяти Г.П.Щедровицкого
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Библиотека

Статьи на иностранных языках

The Organizational-Activity Game as a Method of Collaborative Planning and Problem Solving in the Former Soviet Union

ABSTRACT

Collaborative planning and problem solving is growing in popularity as a means of bringing diverse groups of stakeholders together to work on the resolution of complex public problems where there is potential for controversy. These methods have been used both in the resolution of potentially contentious and difficult community problems (Strauss, 1993) and natural resource disputes (Walker and Daniels, 1994). This paper reports on a method of collaborative planning and problem solving that was uniquely developed in the former Soviet Union. The method, which is known as the Organizational-Activity Game (OAG), was investigated by the authors while the first author was on professional leave in Russia during the 1993-94 academic year.

Introduction

During a roughly 20-year period of rapid social and economic change in the former Soviet Union that preceded the period of perestroika launched by the Communist Party General Secretary Michael Gorbachov during the latter part of the 1980s—a period which has been characterized as a “revolution of the mind” by Russian scholar Blair Ruble (1993), significant developments were occurring associated with the development of a unique method of collaborative planning and problem solving. Known as the Organizational-Activity Game (OAG) or *igra* (translated from Russian into English as “game”), the purpose of the effort was (1) to examine individual and collective thinking activity, (2) to provide participants with an opportunity for thinking more clearly and expressing what is on their minds, and (3) to transform the thoughts of individuals concerning pressing issues or problems in an organization or society into collective thinking activity.

The work on collaborative planning and problem solving in Russia has many parallels to philosophical and theoretical work which underlies collaborative learning recently proposed for planning and problem solving in complex organizations by the Director of MIT’s Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning Program, Professor Peter M. Senge (1990), and applied to the resolution of environmental problems by Walker and Daniels (1994) and the resolution of community problems by Strauss (1993), also see Himmelman (1994). Additionally, given the growing interest in America in making Democracy work through dialogue and the enhancement of public understanding of complex societal issues (see for example, Yankelovich, 1991), we believe that similar work in Russia should be shared with scholars and practitioners working in the area of collaborative planning and problem solving in the West. In this paper we will present a brief history of the OAG; the principles underlying it, design features and techniques; an introduction to leaders in the field, and a brief discussion of applications of the OAG.

Reflections on implications of the method for improving the way Westerners conceptualize collaborative planning and problem solving are also presented.

Research Methods

The research upon which this paper is based used a multiple methods strategy. The American author of the paper collected information while serving as a participant-observer in two organizational-activities games and through an extended period of joint research with Russian specialists in the field. The Russian authors of the paper all had first-hand experiences with the development and application of the OAG in Russia. The first of the two Russian authors is one of the leaders in the practice of conducting OAGs, while the second is a student of the method.

The American author was first introduced to the OAG when a Russian specialist in the method, Dr. Sergei V. Popov of Moscow, who is president of the Inter-regional Methodological Association in Russia, was a guest in his home. Dr. Popov, a mathematical oceanographer by training, was part of a team of Russian professionals in regional and city planning who attended the Goodwill Games held in Seattle, Washington, in the summer of 1990. As part of their program in America, part of the group came to Washington State University (WSU)[2]. During their trip the group examined public issues related to regional planning and environmental concerns with the assistance of WSU faculty. Through intensive conversations with Dr. Popov and more brief discussions with the planners, the American author became curious about what seemed like a Russian version of collaborative planning and problem solving.

In the fall of 1991, a second and related group of Russians again came to the United States and to Washington State University. This time they had two additional specialists in the OAG with them, Mr. Rifat Shaikhutdinov of St. Petersburg, who is now chair of the new Department of Conflictology at St. Petersburg University and Mr. Timothy Sergeisev of Moscow, who is also affiliated with the new Department of Conflictology at St. Petersburg State University. The two specialists conducted a demonstration OAG at Washington State University. The American author was a participant in the demonstration, and Mr. Shaikhutdinov and Mr. Sergeisev stayed in his home. Intensive conversations with these individuals during meals and following the demonstration OAG provided insights into the purpose, structure, and history of the organizational activity game.

During the 1993-94 academic year, the American author went to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he taught courses in conflict resolution at a university and conducted research on the organizational activity game, while serving as a Senior Fulbright Scholar. The Russian authors of the paper were keenly interested in developing information about the organizational activity game that could be communicated to counterparts in the West, and they therefore joined the American author in a program of observation and documentation. The observations included key informant interviews with professionals in the field while attending a special congress of academics and practitioners working with the OAG, and focus group interview with selected specialists in the field, which was also conducted at the congress.

Another part of the methodology was jointly teaching both U.S. and Russian methods of collaborative planning and problem solving during the second university course taught by the American author. The Russian authors and several of their colleagues taught the OAG method to the students, while the American author taught Western methods of collaborative planning and problem solving. By trying to understand the similarities and differences between U.S. and Russian methods, the American author was able to develop an understanding of the OAG, while all of the participants were better able to document the OAG.

The final step planned for the research process was to attend at least one organizational activity game conducted in Russia or one of the former Soviet Republics. Unfortunately, due to the stress of economic conditions in these countries and the rapid structural changes occurring within the government and all aspects of organized life, all of the OAGs that had been scheduled for the Spring and Summer of 1994 were canceled. This precluded further participation by the authors in any additional OAGs.

Lastly, the authors were informed about the method through a review of related research and information about the OAG published in English. Fortunately for the American author, an American scholar (a professor of geography at the University of Washington, Dr. Craig ZumBrunnen) had participated in an OAG in Russia in the fall of 1989. Professor ZumBrunnen had written an article about the experience that was presented to the group of Russians at a special University of Washington-sponsored conference on planned change held in conjunction with the Seattle based Goodwill Games in 1990. When the Russians visited WSU following the Games, they circulated ZumBrunnen's paper. This paper was subsequently published in Russian in the journal *Kentavr* (ZumBrunnen,

1993). The ZumBrunnen article provided the first description of the method prepared by an American, and corroborated many of the observations made by the American author of this paper.

A second paper written in English about the OAG was authored by two Russian leaders in the field, G.E. Shchedrovitskii and S.P. Kotel'nikov (1988). This article provided a concise overview of the method and discussed its history as well as different types of applications. Several parts of this paper are based upon information provided by Shchedrovitskii and Kotel'nikov (op. cit.). Reviewing descriptions of the OAG written in English served to clarify misunderstandings by the American author, and provided additional insights into the method.

Historical Perspective

The history of the organizational activity game goes back to 1953 when a group of Soviet philosophers, mostly at Moscow State University, began to question the relevancy of their discipline. This was a period when Nikita Krushchev was the general secretary of the Communist Party and, although Soviet Society was still under the grip of totalitarian control, the quiet "revolution of the mind" noted by Ruble (op. cit., 1993) was just beginning. The group of philosophers began meeting to confront two questions: Do we need philosophy if it does not help solve human problems? and What will Soviet philosophy do in the future? In the European tradition of people organizing into circles based upon intellectual or artistic interest held in common, the group formed a circle, with Professor Dr. G.P. Shchedrovitskii as its leader.[3] Inspired by Marx's statement, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it," and his methods of analysis, the group called itself "the Moscow Methodological Circle (MMC)." This group and their followers and students referred to themselves as "methodologists."

Members of the MMC were well educated in the European tradition of philosophy, including the work of Hegel, Kant, the early Greek philosophers, and Marx. They were particularly influenced by Hegel's theory of reflection (see Houlgate, 1995; Behler, 1990: 82; and Loewenber, G., 1965:50-54) and the Marxist theory of activity (Shchedrovitskii and Kotel'nikov, op. cit.). According to Shchedrovitskii and Kotel'nikov (op. cit.), from 1952-1960 the methodologists worked on epistemological issues in the theory of thought. Secondly, from 1961 through 1971 they worked on developing a general theory of activity. Thirdly, from 1971 on they worked on what was called a "systemic thinking activity approach" and the development of the "general structure of methodology". The OAG was developed as a special applied form of their work on the organization of collective thinking and thinking activity.

An important theoretical foundation in the development of the organizational activity game was the work of the methodologists on general systems theory, the theory of cognition, and related topics. Some of this early work was translated by an American scholar noted for his work on systems theory, Professor Anatol Rapoport, and published in the journal *General Systems* (Shchedrovitskii, 1977). Additionally, the methodologists were influenced by the sociometry of J.L. Moreno (Moreno, 1950 and 1951; see also Northway, 1952). The work of Moreno provided many of the scientific methods used by the methodologists, and influenced their use of symbolism to represent social activity within a system being addressed in an organizational activity game as well as the relationships which developed among participants within the game.

Another important foundational component to the research of the methodologists was their involvement as leaders in the practice of conducting multi-disciplinary seminars at many universities in the former Soviet Union[4]. Shchedrovitskii and Kotel'nikov (op. cit.) refer to these discussions as "multi-disciplinary methodological seminars" and note that they began in 1955 and became widespread in the early 1960s. The multi-disciplinary seminars were comprised of faculty specialists in the university who would meet quite regularly for several hours at a time to address problems in Soviet society and their resolution, such as ecological problems and industrial production problems, from the different disciplinary perspectives represented in the seminar. An effort was made to assemble the broadest possible group, which included physicists, biologists, engineers, philosophers, chemists, etc. The seminars were generally led by the methodologists, who were by in large affiliated with G.P. Shchedrovitskii and the MMC. The seminars gave the methodologists insights to the problems of individual and group reflection, and the problems of developing mutual relations among participants and collective thinking in groups as the members struggled to address issues from multiple perspectives. The methodologists also gained insight into the relationships between participants and the organizers and leaders of the seminars.

The multidisciplinary seminars were extremely enlightening for everyone involved. They were a totally new and liberating phenomenon in Soviet society. They also helped the methodologists as well as the participants better

understand the “organization of multi-subject thinking,” and how to coordinate “knowledge from different subjects into a unified configuration.”

The university-based seminars provided a positive experience that was compelling for testing in settings outside of an academic setting. According to Shchedrovitskii and Kotel’Nikov (op. cit.) the period 1976 through July of 1979 was a transitional period in the development of the OAG. Here the methodologists began to apply the tactics used in what they called “intellectual-methodological games” conducted in university settings to “practical learning games” that were carried on outside of the university among athletes of the voluntary athletics associations of trade unions (op. cit., 61). This gave them insight into the difficulties of training people to undertake tasks requiring a high level of skill and understanding. It also provided an opportunity to leap from academia to application in the real world of problems in society.

At this point it should again be stressed that significant economic and social changes were occurring in the former Soviet Union, which included an increase in the quantity and quality of education for the Soviet population as a whole as well as a greater differentiation of the Soviet work force (Ruble, op. cit.: 342-245). There was also a growing awareness among Communist Party leaders that there were significant lags in the productivity of the command economy and the need for substantial improvements. In this setting, the methodologists decided to apply their work to the resolution of practical problems in society. The first opportunity was in July of 1979, when they embarked upon responding to a proposal for “developing a range of consumer goods for the Ural region.” This situation gave them an ideal opportunity for “designing and testing a new, complex and systemic organizational form for team thinking activity aimed at dealing with a complex economic problem” (Shchedrovitskii and Kotel’Nikov, op. cit.: 62). The methodologists could now create an organizational activity game in an actual setting involving participants who were faced with a need to take action on real problems in society.

It should also be noted that during this period business games were becoming very popular in the former Soviet Union. Although the approach used in what has been called “Shchedrovitskii’s Game” was quite different than the approach used in business games, the popularity of business games provided further legitimacy for applications of what was by an large an intellectual and theoretical activity to real world situations focusing on the improvement of productivity. For more information on the development of business games in Russia under the leadership of Mary M. Birshstein, see Gagnon (1987).

Shchedrovitskii and Kotel’Nikov actually refer to the period before the game held in the Ural region as the pre-history of the organizational activity game, with the period that followed providing the methodologists with the challenge of consciously creating a “new organizational form of thinking activity” (op. cit., 63). It was during this period that the methodologists developed the principles, design features, and techniques for conducting the organizational activity game.

Principles, Design Features and Techniques as Developed for the Ural Region and Subsequent OAGs

Out of a problem situation in which a client, in this case a government official who is responsible for production of the command economy in the Ural region, was faced with a complicated situation of not knowing exactly how to best achieve the target set forth in the production plan, the methodologists developed their game strategy. The situation