

Email games - plug in and play

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What's an email game?

An email game is a **reusable text-based template**.

It provides a **pre-structured process** for guiding a group of participants through a series of tasks. These tasks are designed to progressively generate and process content around a salient issue.

A game is played in several rounds and **participants engage in activities** like brainstorming, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, predicting and persuading each other.

A **facilitator** orchestrates the game by selecting the right template, adapting it to suit the context, collating content, sending out instructions for each round of play and debriefing the game to draw out key points and bring it to closure.

The templates for these games are deliberately **designed to permit easy replacement of old content with new**. In other words, the content changes, but the process stays the same. You can simply plug in your own content and play!

Email games are **temporal events**, which for a specified time facilitate a creative flow of interaction between a group of people who come together to achieve a **common goal**. That goal could be problem solving, decision-making, and brainstorming, synthesizing ideas or confronting controversial issues. While individual games have a specific purpose and outcome, they all encourage the construction and sharing of new knowledge, understanding, perspectives, and insights.

Email games are **versatile and dynamic**. Although they have been designed primarily for email, they can be adapted for use in forums, chat and web pages. They can also be used with great success in face-to-face delivery.

They can be used as brief interludes to support other activities, or several can be linked together to build a complete learning sequence; they are pre-structured so can be implemented quickly. They can also be used in a planned or a spontaneous way and the same template can be used with different content, for different purposes and to achieve different outcomes.

They suit a **diverse range of training and performance improvement contexts**. We've used them for brainstorming, benchmarking, strategic planning, decision-making, problem solving, conflict resolution and cross-cultural communication. Games have been facilitated for schools, colleges, universities and the corporate sector.

What makes it a game?

A game, whether designed for a face-to-face (F2F) context or for a digital environment, has four critical design characteristics:

Conflict, Control, Closure, and Contrivance

Conflict refers to the fact that the players have a goal to achieve and different obstacles prevent them from achieving it. Very often, conflict is in the form of competition among players or teams. But you can also have conflict with previous records, time limits, or the ingenuity of a computer “opponent”.

Control refers to the rules of the game specifying how you take your turn, make your move, and receive the consequences. Some rules may be explicit while others may be implicit.

Closure refers to the fact that the game has to come to an end. A special rule (called the *termination rule*) specifies when and how the game ends. Termination rules may involve time limits, target scores, or elimination. They also determine who wins the game.

Contrivance refers to the built-in inefficiencies in a game. Obviously, there are more efficient methods for dropping a little white ball in 18 holes than the rules of golf permit us to do. This characteristic of contrivance is what makes people say, “After all, it was only a game”.

It becomes a **learning game** when it has a fifth characteristic that also begins with a C:
Competency

This characteristic refers to the purpose of the game, which is to improve the players’ level of competencies in specific areas. Although we call them learning games there is nothing trivial or contrived about this format. Email games produce measurable performance-based learning outcomes.

There are different types of digital games and most of them require sophisticated multimedia and complex programming. The sophistication of email games however, is not in the technology but in the underpinning instructional design and facilitation process.

While many computer games are designed for person-to-computer interaction, email games promote person-to-person interaction through a knowledge-management approach we call structured sharing (Thiagarajan, 1998).

Benefits and limitations of email games

Since 1998, more than 2,000 players have participated in these games, sending us several thousands of email messages on a variety of topics and issues.

From our own observation and feedback from our players, this is what we have discovered about the limitations and benefits of email games:

Limitations

Here are some limitations associated with email games:

- **They are not fast.** To permit participation from people with busy schedules and different time zones, you have to schedule a few days for each round of play.
- **They don't have bells and whistles.** You have to depend on relevant content and engaging activities to motivate the learner.
- **They are not solitary interactions between the learner and the computer program.** You need a group of people to participate. If they don't play, there is no game.
- **Your email game messages may get lost among the SPAM.** Your game is competing with many other emails for attention and response, so they need purpose and appeal.
- **Players keep dropping in and out of the games.** You need built-in flexibility to permit intermittent play.
- **The name "game" can put people off.** In some contexts "game" seems to be a loaded word that distracts players from the purpose of the game. Renaming them as *electronic experiential activities*, *modified Delphi technique* or *interactive email strategies* helps refocus players on the purpose of the game.

Benefits

Here are some advantages of email learning games.

- **You don't have to learn a new technology to participate.** You are familiar with the use of email and you already use it for several other purposes.
- **Email is ubiquitous.** You can play the learning game from anywhere in the world with anyone in the world.
- **Email is inexpensive.** Most players have access to email at home and in the office; the marginal cost for playing an email games is zero.
- **To the designer, email is an enabling tool for improvisation.** You don't need a production team to code HTML or program Java applets.
- **It is convenient.** The game comes to you. The convenience factor of a push technology like email appeals to many players.
- **To the player, email is unobtrusive.** You don't have to log in, enter your password, and wait for files to download.
- **The process is motivating and engaging but not time-consuming or laborious.** The division of a game into rounds creates anticipation and is not time demanding. Even if players miss a round, they still receive the results, and can join in the next round without losing too much of the flow.

- **Players can be anonymous.** Anonymity allows people to be more candid and extreme in their opinions without fear of reprisal or ridicule. We have also effectively used play names to increase this anonymity.
- **Email games achieve productive outcomes.** These games generate ideas, solve problems and encourage dialogue on topics and issues that are relevant and salient to the participants.
- **Email games are continuously improved.** The in-built iterative feedback process provides dynamic formative evaluation for immediate refinements that even better meet user needs.

Deciding when to use an email game

Based on our field experiences and research, here are some questions to help you decide whether an email game is appropriate for your training or performance improvement context.

- **The task:** What do you want your participants to do? Will a game be an appropriate strategy to achieve the task?
- **The technology:** Do the participants have access to the appropriate hardware, software, and technical support to enable them to effectively participate in an email game?
- **The media:** Is a text-based medium like email an appropriate way to achieve the task and a suitable technology for the user group?
- **Players:** Does the learning context enable players to effectively participate in email games? Issues to consider include voluntary versus mandatory participation, learning location, access, computer literacy, learning preferences and attitude to playing a game.
- **Facilitation:** Do you have the time, commitment and skill to facilitate a virtual game?

Email game examples

Currently we have over 24 templates for a range of learning and performance improvements contexts. Recently we have been trialling the automation of some of our most popular games. Here is a sample of two games.

101

The purpose of 101 is brainstorming. 101 generates and organizes a large number of tips, questions, or facts related to a specific topic.

Product: The end result is a list of more than a hundred tips (or questions or facts) arranged in convenient categories.

Flow of the game: This game is best played at a fast and furious pace. Each day, participants send in a designated number of tips (or questions or facts) to meet a deadline. Daily items are collated under specific categories by the facilitator and sent out to participants the following day. The activity continues until participants generate a total of 101 items.

Participants then vote on the best tips for a range of categories like *Grand Champion*, *Top 10*, *Most Controversial*, *Most Unexpected* and so on.

Template and Facilitator Instructions

The 101 templates including a complete set of step-by-step instructions for facilitating the game can be found at Thiagi's Web site:

<http://www.thiagi.com/email-101tips.html>

Half Life

Purpose: To identify and synthesize the critical elements of a concept, topic, product, procedure, or issue.

Product: Statements about a selected topic, all identifying its essential elements.

Flow of the game: In Round 1, each player makes a statement about the selected topic, using exactly 32 words. During the next four rounds, players successively reduce their statement to exactly 16, 8, 4, and 2 words--while preserving its essential element. During each round, the panel selects the top three statements and other best statements among different categories. After the final round, players vote for the best overall entry and the most consistent performer.

Come and experience an email game and then join in discussions about how they can be used in your context!