

Design Thinking Improv Games

- Warming up for design thinking is about grounding yourself and your team and preparing for the various behaviors required to do various parts of the design process.
- These exercises help you transition from your analytical brain to your synthesis brain. They help your workshop participants get into the right mindset.

Low Threat Exercises

- This first section has a bunch of what we call “low-threat” warmups. They are used to warm-up workshop participants and to get them in the mood for **some** creative behaviors and thinking.
- They don’t ask the participants to do anything that is too risky or embarrassing.
- Use these improv exercises to warm up a new team or to introduce novices to some of the core concepts in design thinking.

High Five!

- duration: 3-5 minutes in one large group
- Walk around in a mosh pit
- First - say hi to everyone you meet
- Then - shake hands
- Then - high five
- Optional – hug
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy in the room

Alphabet Game

- duration: 5 minutes done with: 5-6 people is best
- Ask everyone to stand and make a circle in his or her group, or in groups of 5-6 participants. The goal in this exercise is to complete reciting the alphabet, one letter at a time, from A to Z.

The rules are:

1. Everyone has to participate and say letters.
2. You can only say one letter at a time.
3. The next letter has to come from someone new.
4. You can go in sequence, around the circle.
5. If two people say a letter at the same time you have to start over from “A”

Take-Away – Paying attention to each other, and building non-verbal rapport is important for innovation and positive team building

Massage Game

- duration: ~ 3 minutes done with 5-10 People

Ask the participants to stand up, get in a line, and turn facing one direction, like a dance or conga line. Then ask each person to put their hands on the person in front of them, on their shoulders. Then ask them to “rub your partners shoulders, lightly.”

At that point you can reveal that everyone is participating in a massage exercise. After about 30 seconds of this give the following instruction, “OK, now turn around and do that nice thing that your partner just did for you.” You may or may not need to repeat the instruction, “put your hands on the person in front of you, on their shoulders” and “rub your partners shoulders, lightly.”

Take – Away - people get to know each other a little and try something that is pleasant.

Medium Threat Exercises

- This section has a bunch of what we call “medium threat” warmups. They are used after you have warmed-up the workshop participants with some low-threat activities and they are used to acting in front of each other
- These exercises ask the participants to do things that are a little more risky or embarrassing.
- Use these improv exercises to warm up an experienced team.

“Yes, and...”

- Duration: 2-5 minutes. done in pairs
- Pick a prompt like; “Let’s plan an awesome BBQ.”
- One person starts by making a declarative statement about the prompt, “We could have hot dogs at the BBQ!” Their partner says, “Yes, and... and then adds something to the idea. In this example it might be, “Yes, and we could make s’mores for dessert.” From that point on, the partners exchange ideas, always starting with the phrase, “Yes, and...”
- Take-Away – when we use the “Yes, and...” method it is easy to come up with lots of ideas and it builds teamwork and creativity.

“No, but...”

Duration: 2-5 minutes // Size: Done in pairs

Pick a prompt like; “Let’s plan an awesome BBQ.”

One person starts by making a declarative statement about the prompt, “We could have hot dogs at the BBQ!” Their partner says, “NO or BUT...” and then raises an objection to the idea. In this example it might be, “NO, I don’t like hot dogs.” or “But hot dogs are so obvious, let’s do something original. ” The person objecting then adds a positive idea only to get shot down with a “No, but. The partners exchange ideas, always starting with the phrase, “NO” or BUT.

Take-Away – when we come from a negative place, we have trouble generating ideas, building teamwork, and breaking out of the box.

Sound Ball

- duration: ~5 minutes // Size: 5-8 is best

The instructions for *Thrower*: Make an imaginary “ball” with your hands. Act as if the ball has a specific size and weight. Also assign a weird sound to the ball. Make eye contact with someone, the *Catcher*, and throw them the “ball” while making the weird sound you have selected for the ball.

The instructions for the *Catcher*: Be prepared to catch the imaginary sound ball. Make good eye contact with the *Thrower* and indicate that you are ready to catch the ball. As the ball is thrown to you, catch it and repeat the sound associated with this ball as you catch it.

Take-Away – Paying attention to each other, and building non-verbal rapport is important for innovation and positive team building

Proverbs

- duration: 3-5 minutes done with: 5-8 people
- The goal in this exercise is to complete a proverb, which is made up of single words uttered at random as the proverb goes around the circle. One person starts by saying the first word that comes to mind, then the person to their left say the first word that comes to mind, based on the word they just heard, and this pattern repeats.

There is no fixed formula for making a proverb, the group just knows when one has been completed. Once the proverb is complete, the sequence stop, and everyone in the circle puts their hands together in a prayer position, finger to finger, and says, “yes, yes, yes, yes...” for a few seconds.

Take- Away - Improvising in the moment is a skill you can practice and it's important for other design skills like brainstorming.

Stoking Exercises

- These next exercises are all about getting the room to be more energetic. They involve high-energy behaviors and taking some personal risk.
- Use these with teams that are already comfortable with the idea of improv and understand the importance of working on the mind/body connection.
- It is always a good idea to let the participants know that they do not need to follow the instructor if they are not willing to performing the physical tasks. We often say something like, “Participate in these exercises in a way that feels comfortable to you. If you are feeling out of breath or off-balance stop and regroup.”

Shakeout or Countdown

- duration 3-5 minutes, done as individuals in a group
- this is an individual exercise. All you need is the room for people to spread out – pick a good-sized room and about 30 people for maximum effect.
- Make sure that everyone has some space around them so that no one accidentally bumps into another. Demonstrate the counting-down process first and then have people follow your example.
- First, put your right hand in the air and shake it will you count down from 8. “Say out loud - 8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1”. Then put your left hand in the air and shake it to the count of “8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1. Then lift your right foot and count down, then your left.
- Second, put your right hand in the air and shake it will you count down from 7. “Say out loud - 7,6,5,4,3,2,1”. Then put your left hand in the air and shake it to the count of “7,6,5,4,3,2,1. Then lift your right foot and count down, then your left.
- After that demo, get everyone on their feet and count down from 8 to 1.
- Be careful when you get to the low numbers, the activity becomes very animated and the jumping motions very fast.
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy in the room

Psychic Game (aka Convergence)

- duration: 3-5 minutes, done in pairs
- The pairs count off, “1, 2, 3...” and then simultaneously say a word. This first word is whatever comes to mind and is essentially random.
- They count off, “1, 2, 3...” again, and then both try to say the word that they think is “in between” the first two words. If those words do not match they repeat the process. Eventually they say the same word.
- Once that happens they should shout out and Hi-Five each other and the facilitator should shout out “We got a match!” You keep going until a majority of the pairs have found a match.
- It is not uncommon for some teams to find a match 2, 3 or more times, while other teams struggle to find one. Some pairs will get better and better at this, and some will even be able to “match” on the first time. End with a short round of applause.
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy and rapport in the room

The Machine Game

- duration 3-5 minutes
- size – “machines” can be any size but this tends to work best with teams of 5-6. That way people are not left waiting a long time for the “machine” to come to them.
- Participants make a line and stand side by side, next to each other. The first person in line starts the “machine” by (1) making an imaginary part in their hands, and (2) making some robot-like gestures and some wacky machine sounds with the part, as if they are making or building the part. They then hand off the “thing” they have made to the person in line next to them. They make sure that the person next to them has received the part and then they repeat the process, making robot-like gestures and sound again. They keep repeating their sound and motion until the end of the game.
- The second person in line receives the part and starts their element of the machine. They make new sounds and gestures and then hand the part to the next person. This continues until the last person has run their element of the machine four or five times. A large round of applause completes the exercise.
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy in the room

Snap – Clap - Stomp

- duration: 3-5 minutes, Done in pairs
- Start by counting 1,2,3
- After you get good at exchanging numbers, replace the 1 with Snap
- After you get good at “Snap, 2, 3” , replace the 2 with a Clap
- After you get good at “Snap, Clap, 3” replace the 3 with Stomp
- Do ”Snap, Clap, Stomp” a half dozen times and then stop.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnyyxzdWe4M>

Radiation/Magnetism Game Part 1: Radiation

- duration 3-5 minutes
- size – this is a good large group exercise and you need a group of at least 20 to make this work. The exercise requires a large clear space. There can't be tables or chairs in the way or someone could get hurt. We often step outside the classroom to an open parking lot or field to do this improv.
- Assemble your group in a large clear area with plenty of room to move around. There are two versions of the game, each designed to provoke a different kind of movement and “emergent behavior”.
- RADIATION: Instruct everyone to silently pick someone else in the group and make that person the source of fatal radiation. The goal of the game is to keep a neutral person, basically anyone else in the group, between you and the source of radiation that you picked. If you touch your radiation source person, you are dead and out of the game. You freeze in-place. Give everyone about 15 seconds to silently pick their radiation source. Stress that it is important that no one knows if they have been picked. In practice, almost everyone will be simultaneously a person trying to avoid radiation and a source of radiation for someone else. After everyone has made his or her selection, stress that here should be no running or pushing during the game. Count down “1, 2, 3 Go!” and let the players start moving around. After about a minute, or whenever the game achieves a static equilibrium, say stop. Debrief the players on their experience. Then end with a short round of applause.
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy in the room and to demonstrate “emergent behavior”.

Radiation/Magnetism Game

Part 2: Magnetism

- duration 3-5 minutes
- size – this is a good large group exercise and you need a group of at least 20 to make this work. The exercise requires a large clear space. There can't be tables or chairs in the way or someone could get hurt. We often step outside the classroom to an open parking lot or field to do this improv.
- Assemble your group in a large clear area with plenty of room to move around. There are two versions of the game, each designed to provoke a different kind of movement and “emergent behavior”.
- Magnetism is exactly the same as radiation, but the rule is reversed. Instruct everyone to silently pick someone else in the group and make that person the source of a magnetic attraction. The goal of the game is connect with your “magnet” while keeping a neutral person, basically anyone else in the group, between you and anyone that is attracted to you. If you connect with your “magnet”, you win the game and stand still with your arms around your magnet. If someone connects with you (you were their magnet but didn't know it) you lose and you stand still. Give everyone about 15 seconds to silently pick their magnetic attractor. Stress that it is important that no one knows if they have been picked. In practice, almost everyone will be simultaneously a person trying get to their magnetic source and a magnet for someone else. After everyone has made his or her selection, stress that here should be no running or pushing during the game. Count down “1, 2, 3 Go!” and let the players start moving around. After about a minute, or whenever the game achieves a static equilibrium, say stop. Debrief the players on their experience. Then end with a short round of applause.
- Take-Away – this is a good way to build the energy in the room and to demonstrate “emergent behavior”.