

# **The High School Game: An Intergenerational Board Game for Discussing Secondary School Stresses**

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**Abstract:** In contemporary society, the American high school experience requires students to strike a delicate balance between social and academic pressures. These students wrestle social issues like bullying, body image, evolving values, and drug use while trying to meet academic requirements that prepare them for the world outside their secondary school microcosm. Typically teens are underprepared for these pressures and are left to face them alone. The High School Game is a solution that creates a safe discussion space for considering strategies for coping with these stresses and maintaining focus on academic achievement. In the game, players make their own choices and they must balance between their social and academic life. The game exploits inter-generational play, supporting counselors and parents in critical exchanges with students concerning important issues. The game brings real life to a play environment where critical thinking is encouraged and emotions are expressed without real world consequences

## **Introduction**

The high school experience is a critical time in any teenager's life. It is a journey that paves the way for a person's future. Unfortunately, most students start that journey blindfolded with no preparation or expectations (Brodkey, 2010). They are suddenly facing social and academic issues with little knowledge or experience. In a controlled survey, 72% of teens reported that they have been victims of bullying (Salmon, 1998). In another survey, 39% of teens from Minnesota suffered from a mild to severe case of depression (Walker, 2002). There are many other issues teenagers face, such as struggling with personal identity, peer pressure, fitting in with a social group, stress from academics and dating (Ryan, 2000). The transition from middle school to high school has a particularly unique set of challenges (Akos, 2004). It is no wonder that these students struggle to achieve academic success.

Interestingly, some of these challenges are nearly timeless. While cyber bullying is a relatively new challenge, other forms of bullying have persisted through generations. Likewise issues of peer pressure and academic cheating have been experienced by parents and grandparents. A primary goal of this game is not to prescribe solutions to players, but to simply facilitate conversations between family, friends, counselors, mentors or other groups of pre-secondary students and their more experienced guardians.

The philosophical approach to these challenges assumed by the designers is that an appropriate balance of social and academic issues should aid student success. Instead of encouraging students to prefer social concerns or over academic concerns, the designers understood the challenge as one of balance. It is true that there is as much social growth in these formative years (Akos), as there is academic growth.

Proponents of game based learning understand the fundamental design benefits of games as educational tools. In particular, games offer a safe space in which to practice real world skills (Crawford, 1984). They also encourage experimentation; as such safe spaces insulate players from the risks of real world experimentation (Huizinga, 1955). It is these core concepts that motivated the design of a game to help prepare students of secondary school experience.

## **Game Design Background**

This design team evaluated several models for delivering this educational content. Digital play was briefly entertained, but dismissed for its inability to support a wide variety of demographic and

technographic situations. The team noted that play on a standard computer necessitated access to a computers which is a drawback for socioeconomic disparities which make computers expensive for some. Digital play also had the potential to emphasize the differences between generations, as older players may have to struggle with a digital games interface more than younger players. In play sessions we also noted that through playing board games play seemed more player focused and conversational than the common screen focus of conventional digital play.

The design goal was then to create a simple but engaging experience analog experience. To do this, the design team collected information about contemporary social and academic challenges that high school students face. This aggregate list was organized and evaluated to maximize a diverse set of demographics. The hope is that pre-secondary students in rural Ohio will feel that many of the game's foci are as relevant to them as another group playing in urban Chicago.

To support intergenerational play, the language of the game is generalized. The game avoids the use of slang, for example, but its discussion basis facilitates natural language between players. Where new language is introduced by players, it is hoped that part of that dialog includes explanation of such language; it is hoped that players unfamiliar with modern slang terminology have it explained to them by the user. If for example a player says *douche*, it is hoped that players unfamiliar with the term have it explained to them by the user.

According to psychiatrist Lenore Terr, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Francisco, "play demonstrates that if we don't find a way out of difficult situations, we will play much of our lives over and over again" (Marango, 1999). It is hoped that instead of making repeated experimental mistakes in the high school environment players can practice and discover new ways to succeed through the design of the high school game.

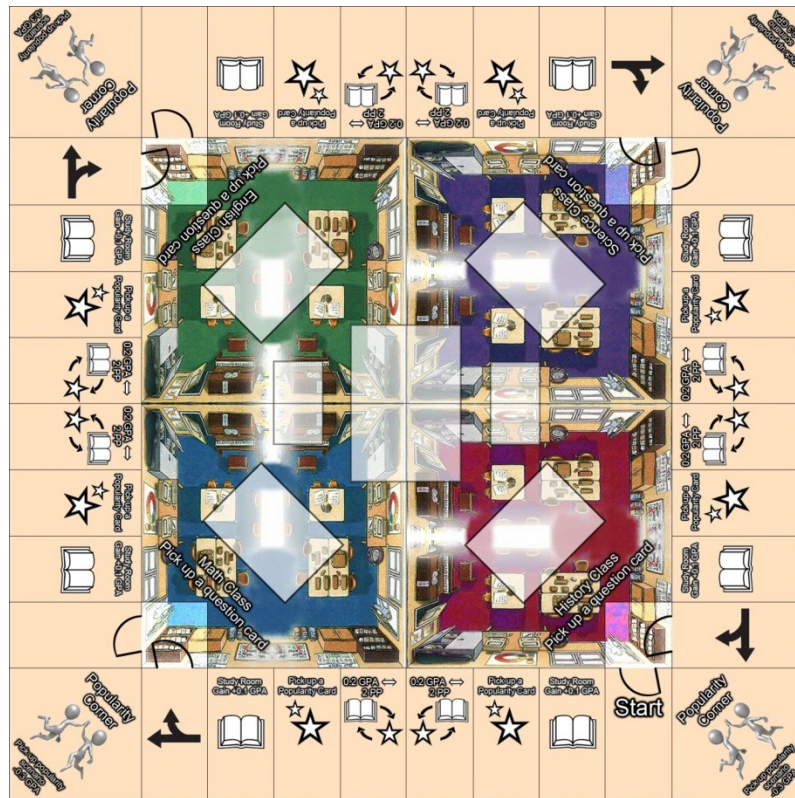
## **Game Design**

The team began by evaluating the United States secondary school experience commonly referred to as high school (grades 7-12 or grades 9-12). The design of the game translates those experiences into gameplay. The game is a turn based experience for a minimum of two players and a maximum of 6. The primary goal of the game is to have the highest final score, calculated by combining academic points with popularity points. Players are given choices to achieve both types of points and they must balance the two to best their opponents.

Players take on the role of a student who just started high school. In the beginning of the game each player must join a clique to determine their starting stats for the game. For example, jocks will have the highest amount of popularity and nerds will have the highest GPA. The obvious procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008) of joining a clique is mitigated by a simple design goal. The game's design demonstrates that the clique the player chooses doesn't matter; what really matters is how you play the game. The game does not bind the player to these cliques; they are simply a way for players to experience the type labeling that occurs in many schools and to experience self-empowered movement beyond such labels.

Through game testing we found that there is no clique that has a distinct advantage over the others. An alternative way to play the game is to role play the part of your chosen clique. For example, when the debates come up, each player would respond in the way they feel each clique behaves. This could help reveal how the players view the other cliques, which is designed to spur debates around such roles, clichés and stereotypes. It is also meant to help players interpret their own self-image within these bounds.

Once cliques are chosen, players proceed through the bulk of the game experience. Players move marker pieces around the board shown in figure 1. Movement is managed by a roll of the dice, counting clockwise from the start position. At specific times players are asked to answer age appropriate academic trivia questions from four basic subjects: Math, Science, History and English. Questions are stored on classroom cards placed in the appropriate section of the board. Correct answers to these questions improve a player's grade point average (GPA). All players are also required to complete a final exam by answering one question from each of the four topics at the end of the game.



**Figure 1: The game board.**

Social savvy is reported through a popularity points average (PPA). Popularity in high school is largely evaluated and determined by a student's peer group. As such, players are awarded popularity points by other players. Earlier designs of the game did not provide an effective basis for popularity points. Through play testing the team determined that qualitative evaluation of a high school relevant topic demonstrated the most effective affinity between game goal and real life analogy.

Players are awarded popularity points through their ability to debate. After each round, two players debate on topics ranging from sex to religion in schools. The remaining players listen to these arguments and award their limited points accordingly. This play strategy demonstrates three primary benefits. First it encourages players to think about socially relevant high school issues before they arise. Second, it allows players to negotiate the social systems around consensus building which should prove useful in garnering popularity in the real world. Third, it encourages players to view multiple perspectives on relevant issues.

It is this third benefit that is particularly important to the game's design. The challenges of navigating this phase of a young person's life are not to be met alone. Parents, counselors, or other individuals who have matriculated out of college benefit from discussing these topics with young people before they experience them. It is hoped that this one aspect of the High School game can facilitate an intergenerational discussion through intergenerational play. Players are free to make claims based on their personal values and experience.

It is also important to note that all players are practicing the ability to make claims relevant to the other players. This should encourage players to formulate debates focused not on their own justifications, but on the other players' priorities, values and judgments. The novelty here is that intergenerational conversations are reoriented toward same level discussions, instead of the more typical talking down

to that might occur between parent and child or counselor and advisee. All such activity occurs with the backdrop of existing social status and relationships that existed before gameplay occurred.

Example debate questions include bulimia and its relationship to the portrayal of women in the media, drinking alcohol in high school and bullying.

Making the right choices in real life is difficult, and our team endeavored to make them equally as challenging in the game. At each of the corners of the board the player has a choice to go to class and study or participate in a social event. Going to class or studying gives the player an opportunity to answer a question to increase GPA. Skipping class and going through a popularity corner will make the player lose some GPA but it will also give the player a chance to increase the amount of popularity points they have. This feature in the game is configured so that there are pros and cons to choosing each path. An additional lesson taught by the game is that skipping class can be detrimental to your academic career. The principle of choice is something this game really wanted to accurately portray. It gives the player an opportunity to experiment and discover what works best for them. The team feels this is an important part of high school, to begin the search for self-discovery.

At the end of the game each player must answer a question from each of the four academic subjects as the final exam. Answering correctly contributes significantly to the final GPA and subsequently winning the game. Players who are just entering high school can start recognizing how significant exams are in high school and beyond.

By playing this game the player should gain a better understanding of the challenge of balancing high school stresses. The game strives to connect younger students with older, more experienced mentors. The discussion-based nature of the game creates a connection that can be formed across different generations, facilitating meaningful discussion and an opportunity to better understand differences between these groups. The hope is that this game would be a great addition to help any adult connect with and understand their children or students.

### **In the Classroom and future Work**

The High School Game offers a play space that is entertaining as well as educational. One of the main characteristics of the High School Game is the opportunity for intergenerational play. Through gameplay players exchange opinions toward important issues like sex, bullying, and drugs. Since intergenerational play is encouraged, each player can learn about the opinions of others across generations. The High School Game presents a fun way to express ideas where learning is a part of the gameplay; each generation could potentially hold different views that another generation may not have realized. The overall learning goals are centered on the pre-secondary players. By hearing testimonies and seeing where each side stands on an issue, young students can grasp a sense of right and wrong during the gameplay.

A main goal of the team was to expose this exchange of ideas to the younger generation that is preparing for high school. Since there are not many interactive means of learning about high school pressures, young students can use this game as a way to practice navigating situational obstacles. The game is designed to help students experiment with ideas and pressures alongside teachers or guidance counselors in a safe learning environment, with no real life consequences. If young students are able to practice or replicate harmful circumstances that will lead to consequences, then they are able to apply what they've learned to their own high school careers with concepts of cause and effect. By practicing what not to do or learning the facts about controversial issues in negative situations, students will be able to hypothesize a means of how to act when a stressful situation arises in their actual lives.

Since this game is about high school, players are able to experiment with and discuss the critical balance of social life and education. The overall point system is a balance between popularity (PPA) and GPA which gives each player the opportunity to choose a strategy on which to favor.

Although only a portion of the planned demographic, the game has been play tested with Miami University students. The results indicate that when a player focuses solely on either popularity or GPA, they have the lowest final game score. However, the players who are able to balance GPA and popularity have a higher overall score. What the High School Game trains in players is the link between success and a balance between social skills and academics equally. Social skills are

actually practiced as socially aware communication skills, which the designers view as an important aspect of the larger equation of popularity.

The designers expect to play test the game with a wider range of intergenerational players. It is likely that the game will be tested among a wider demographic through relationships with urban and rural schools in Ohio and Illinois. The hope is also to solicit feedback from current high school students about the hot topic issues that affect their daily lives. The designers understand that until such research is conducted the game is largely a theoretical investigation without limited illustration of strengths and weakness. The design team also invites collaborative investigations through partnerships with other researchers.

## Conclusion

The academic and social pressures put on young students today and how they respond to these pressures can greatly impact their adult life. The High School Game tries to identify these problems and address them head on. The choices made in the game are similar to choices made in reality. The High School Game focuses on finding the balance between social life and academics, discussions on controversial topics, and exchanging ideas. Players young and old bring a sense of real life stresses to a safe and consequence-free play space. There is no better way to prepare young students for high school and the life that follows than role playing the experience themselves.

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