



*Linking People,
Learning & Performance*

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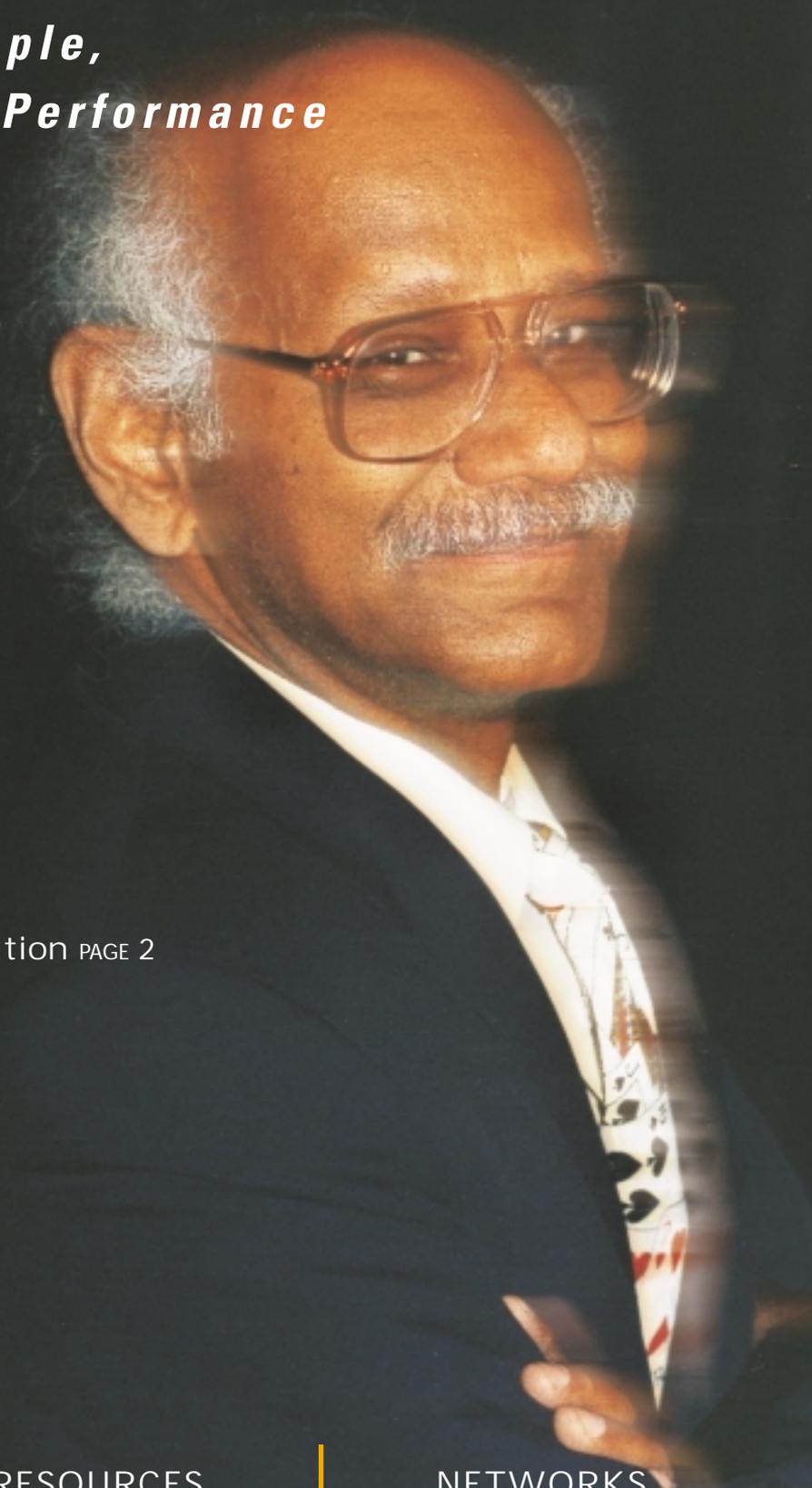
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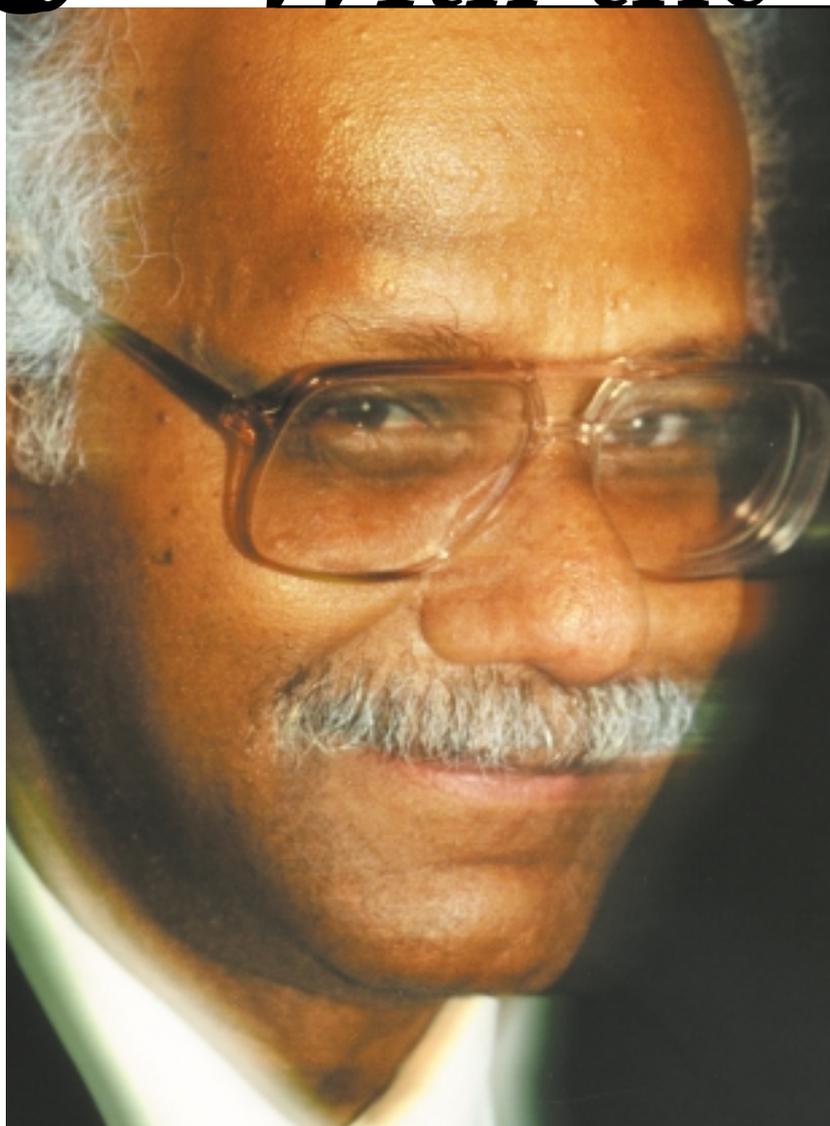
RESOURCES

NETWORKS



Playing *With the*

Sivasailam Thiagarajan (“Thiagi”), president of Workshops by Thiagi, is a prolific writer, designer of hundreds of games and simulations, decades-long ASTD member, and perennial favorite at ASTD conferences. Thiagi wrote the chapter on games and simulations in the ASTD Training & Development Handbook and has served as president of the North American Simulation and Gaming Association and the International Society for Performance Improvement. He is writing a book and an Info-line to be published by ASTD early next spring.



Rules:

An Interview With “Thiagi”

Ring ... ring... ring...

“Hello. I cannot find Thiagi around. But please leave a message because I’m sure he’s extremely eager to talk to you.”

After that voice-mail introduction, Thiagi *did* eagerly consent to an interview with *ASTD*. On the 476th day of his self-imposed design-a-game-a-day challenge, he took time to talk about his background, his philosophy, his renewable source of inspiration, and his upcoming book and *Info-line*. He was about to leave for Indianapolis to conduct a preconference workshop at *ASTD TechKnowledge*® 2000.

Thiagi has been following his own advice – to play *with*, not *within*, the rules – from an early age in Madras, India. In fact, his entrance into the learning and performance profession was a form of early rebellion. When his headmaster father advised the seven-year-old never to become a teacher, Thiagi “decided that was the only career I wanted in my life, being a negative child.”

Later, as a teacher of high school physics, he was invited to a lecture, after which he got into an argument with the guest expert. Explains Thiagi: “He thought I was a smart aleck, but when he went back and checked the citation I gave him, he found out I was right and he was wrong. He invited me to become his graduate assistant at the psychology department at Indiana University.” And Thiagi stayed in Bloomington, Indiana ... “because, like a little duckling, I was imprinted. Because of the early reinforcement of my individualistic behavior, I thought, ‘This must be home,’ so I stayed.”

ASTD: Your interest in games and interactive activities had an early start, didn’t it?

Thiagi: Yes, as a physics teacher, for example, rather than lecturing on the internal combustion engine, I just took my class outside. We went out into the street and hot-wired a car – took it all apart, looked at the engine, put it all back (so we would not be arrested) ... and came back to class. So it was literally street learning rather than classroom learning; experiential activity at the most intense levels. Later, when I was just about to finish my doctorate, the U.S. Office of Education accepted my grant proposal to design training packages using games to train teachers working with handicapped children.

ASTD: What is the main focus of *Workshops by Thiagi*?

Thiagi: My mission statement says it’s to help improve human performance effectively, efficiently, and enjoyably. My focus is on the enjoyable part. I believe all learning must be enjoyable. It is not true that true learning requires suffering and pain. That’s my major approach. Within that, my specialty seems to be designing games, simulations, experiential activities, and enjoyable approaches to learning.

ASTD: It sounds like fun!

Thiagi: Yes, but fun is a bad word, so I usually say my focus is on getting the learners engaged rather than letting the learners have fun. For example, a couple of months ago I worked with the local hospice designing a game on death and dying with dignity. It definitely was not fun, but it had people absolutely engaged.

ASTD: Can you share a little about the book you will publish with *ASTD* next winter?

Thiagi: With [*ASTD*’s] Ethan Sanders, I’m doing a book on different types of performance improvement interventions. The whole idea is quickly spreading that training is only one part of improving human performance. So this book is going to be a collection of strategies for improving human performance. It will deal with training, with motivation, with support, with technology, with wellness – a whole variety of approaches to help people move beyond being just an order-taking trainer into being a performance strategist.

I’m also doing an *Info-line* on what I call “lecture games,” or interactive lectures that combine the control and structure of lecture presentations with the excitement and effectiveness and motivation of game-like activities.

ASTD: Do you find a difference in how different audiences respond to games and activities?

Thiagi: Yes and no. A lot of people say, you cannot play these games in Australia or with Navajo Indians, or among Polynesians. Or, don't try any of your American games with this group; they will hate it. I don't take anybody seriously ... before long, there are a whole lot of people absolutely engaged. Playing games is a universal human need; we are a species that plays. So there is absolutely no problem conducting games anywhere in the world.

Having said that, let me hasten to say that the way people prefer to play games depends on their cultural values and beliefs. For example, I definitely will not play Twister with a mixed gender group if I'm in India, where cross-gender touching is a taboo. When I'm playing games with a group in Japan that consists of older and younger people, I will isolate the older people and make them judges, leaders, scorekeepers, or something like that, because that particular culture has a great need to show respect to age. So I play the same game, but I tweak it to suit the needs of a given culture or audience.

One of my favorite quotes is “don't play within the rules of the game but play with the rules of the game.”



A THIAGI FAVORITE: “THIRTY-FIVE”

One of Thiagi's favorite games is “35,” which can be adapted to any topic.

The principle is that people learn best when they create the content. Give each class member an index card, and tell them to write one suggestion on the workshop topic.

Then tell everybody to look at the card, note how brilliant the idea is, and then emotionally detach themselves from the idea because they are going to send it out into the real world, where the best idea will rise to the top.

Next, have everybody turn the cards face down and keep passing them to someone else until all of the cards are mixed up.

Blow your whistle and have people find a partner. Each pair compares the two ideas on their cards and distributes 7 points between these two ideas, marking the numbers on the back of the card. (If one terrific idea merits 7 points, the other gets 0; if they're fairly equal, one can get 4 and the other 3.)

Swap cards again; when the whistle blows, form partners and compare the two ideas. Repeat these steps a total of five times. At the end of the fifth round, each card will have five numbers on the back.

Have class members add up the numbers and identify the top-scoring 10 ideas, and briefly comment on all of the ideas.

You can use this 20-minute activity as an icebreaker, as a closer activity, or at any other time. The concept is that participants know a lot and bring their own ideas; if you can structure the situation and get out of the way, they can learn a lot.

ASTD: Are there differences within a single culture, depending on the type of occupation, for example?

Thiagi: Exactly. The way accountants play a game is very different from the way social workers play the same game. The games engineers prefer are very different from the games trainers prefer.

There are personality differences, occupational differences, gender differences, age differences, experience differences, and so on. One of the strategies I follow is to change the rules of the game. One of my favorite quotes is “don’t play *within* the rules of the game but play *with* the rules of the game.” For any game, I have at least a dozen different modifications, plus many more I can make up on the spot, to increase or decrease the level of competition, the level of self-disclosure, touching, physical movement, cognitive complexity, and so on.

ASTD: One of my questions was whether it takes certain personality traits to make these games work—and I think you’re saying you have to be flexible.

Thiagi: Exactly. We did a study to discover the characteristic behaviors of excellent facilitators. We came up with the alarming conclusion that there is no single characteristic common to all of these facilitators. Not only that, but the same facilitator behaves in a very inconsistent fashion every time she is conducting the same activity. So we came up with the face-saving but extremely meaningful conclusion that the most important behavior on the part of facilitators is flexibility – to be able to change, to be able to modify. If you are rigid, you are going to fail miserably. On the other hand, if you are capable of being responsive and reactive to the needs of your audience, you will do great.

One of the things I recommend to people who want to become game facilitators is to take improv [improvisational theater] classes. Put yourself in a place where somebody throws out something and you’ve got to act it out, or come up with a story, or do an improvisational skit.

ASTD: What challenges do you see facing the profession as a whole today?

Thiagi: One of the main challenges is the attitude that says, we’ve got limited time, just give us the facts and stop fooling around playing games.

The second challenge – which is both a challenge and an opportunity – is that you’ve got to go online. You’ve got to go Web-based, CD-ROM based, because more and more training is moving in that direction. You can export

almost anything you can do in the form of a classroom game to an online, Web-based, or CD-based activity.

The third challenge is the tendency to confuse bells and whistles with instructional effectiveness. But research seems to indicate not only that bells and whistles don’t contribute to learning, but also that they possibly distract people from paying attention to the key message.

ASTD: How long have you been a member of ASTD?

Thiagi: Ages and ages. I think I joined ASTD as soon as I could afford it out of my graduate assistant’s salary, probably sometime in the early ‘70s.

ASTD: What have you found most helpful about your membership?

Thiagi: I get a lot of useful, up-to-date information from reading *T&D*, by attending the conferences, and by being able to develop relationships with a group of eager, happy people who are practitioners, out there on the firing line without any great need to publish scholarly books.

ASTD: Would you like to add anything else?

Thiagi: One of the philosophies shared with me by my grandparents is the importance of taking serious things lightly and light things seriously. Find out what makes people laugh and learn. And take serious things lightly – don’t get hung up on WBT or human performance technology. Be able to laugh at yourself, laugh at your own pretensions.

THIAGI’S TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- Take an improv class.
- Plan with your left brain and implement with your right.
- Keep an open mind and a playful mood.
- Always conduct a debriefing. The game is just an excuse for having a discussion among the participants.
- Don’t count the number of games, but make a few games count.
- Play *with* the rules, rather than *within* the rules.
- Start with a minimal set of rules and introduce more as needed.
- Intervene only when necessary; let players’ behaviors determine the flow of the activity.