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Why a game in which you look for a real, live pink elephant could help save the world

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Ari Daniel



Edgard Gouveia believes in the power of games. He stages big communal games to help people connect and solve problems. Dancing together is part of his process. Above: A circle dance he staged at the PxP Festival in Berlin on June 18. After several minutes of dancing, he asked participants to hug at least 5 other people. Many of them came up to him to thank and hug him, too.

Marlena Waldthausen for NPR

Edgard Gouveia Jr., 58, says the key to solving the world's problems is games. "I use games and narrative to mobilize crowds," says the Brazilian game inventor and co-founder of Livelab. He's worked with schools, companies, government offices and slums. And his target audiences keep getting bigger. "For example, games that can make a whole town, a whole city or even a whole country play together," he says.

And now he's developing a global game called "Jornada X" whose goal is to get kids and teenagers to save nothing less than all life on the planet. Gouveia's thinking is that if you can frame a problem as a challenge or epic journey, then kids "can solve a lot of problems that adults can't," he says. "And they're able to mobilize the adults among them."

NPR sat down with Gouveia to discuss his ambitions to crowdsource and gamify the solving of big problems and how games grabbed a hold of him as a boy. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

When was the first time you realized that games could be used to achieve something big?

When I was a kid, we had this game called *gincana*. In Brazil, it goes back like 100 years. Fewer communities play it today, but you can still find maybe 30 cities in Brazil where it's played.

Here's how it works. Once a year, the whole town or city was invited to play together. We created teams of 500 or 600 people that included kids and adults and grandparents. It was like a big weekend festival.

And we played silly, impossible missions. There was actually a commission that created these missions.



Edgard Gouveia discovered the power of games as a boy when his community would embark on an annual competitive activity — like finding a pink elephant! He says that games represent "a kind of collective intelligence ... a brainstorm the size of a city. I witnessed the creative potential we have to solve anything."

Marlena Waldthausen for NPR

What's an example of one of these missions that community members would compete in?

I remember the first one that I played in my hometown of Santos. There was this stage in front of the church where the whole town of thousands of people gathered to hear what the mission was. And the guy said into the microphone, "You have three hours to bring a real pink elephant."

There are no wild elephants in Brazil. And there's certainly no pink elephant anywhere! But when the guy said we had three hours, the whole town started screaming and running, trying to find a solution. This is an ancestral training system that awakens and strengthens the power of community because you cannot complete the mission by yourself.

After five minutes, someone in the crowd said, "The circus!" Then his team ran and drove to the circus in another city. And the owner loaned them the elephant

because everyone knows that the *gincana* is something sacred. Everyone wants to help you. So he probably said, "OK, take it, but bring it back in three hours! Please! Because I have a show."

This team thought they were going to win since they had the elephant. "Nobody's gonna find a pink elephant. We're the amazing ones!"

But another team brought an elephant from another town and they started painting it pink. The first team said, "No! You can't do that!" But the second team said, "Nobody said you couldn't paint a real elephant pink."

So people created these crazy strategies out of nothing. And we did it together. It's a kind of collective intelligence... a brainstorm the size of a city. And then we all laughed. We all celebrated. Even if you lost, you couldn't believe these groups actually brought real elephants to your town.

As a boy, I witnessed the creative potential we have to solve anything.

What gets in the way of solving big problems today, do you think?

There's a mindset that leads us to create scarcity in our behavior with our neighbors, with our partners, with other countries. It's the idea that there's not enough for everybody. So we feel like we better collect and save for ourselves and for our families.

But this idea of scarcity is crazy. It creates a kind of social sickness. You can be a millionaire but if you have the idea of scarcity in your head, you'll want to collect more and save more.

The people that often share the most are the poorest people. If you give someone who's homeless a sandwich, they will share it. They know that tomorrow, they won't have food. And if they share with someone now, that person may share with them tomorrow. All over the world, the homeless people I've met have a different kind of knowledge.

Most of us in big cities, we see the other as a competitor or a potential enemy.

But for many traditional communities, if they see you coming and they never saw someone that looks like you before, they'll find the difference attractive. "Oh, it's a

potential friend," they might think. So they want to feed you, learn from you, bring you to their home.

So how do you shift this mindset of scarcity?

It's not about trying to educate people out of it because for them, it feels true. They've experienced that scarcity. You cannot manipulate people's will. But you can manipulate or design the environment so that scarcity isn't important.

What I do is help build skills in others that I've learned from traditional communities, Indigenous villages or observing kids in nature.

I just tell people, "Let's play." And through games and playful activities, we create a field of trust, of safety, of love and empathy. And people wind up wanting to give more and more.

When you create abundance of connection, abundance of possibility, people sense it right away. It doesn't matter if for 30 or 40 years they were living in scarcity. When our biology finds an abundance of love, connection and an acceptance that we can be ourselves, people flourish within minutes.

How do you create this abundance through your organization Livelab?

Collective intelligence and collective action are way more powerful than a traditional pyramid or hierarchy. We're trying to tune back into a community's power to bring people together.

And we do that through this guiding question: What if building the world of our dreams could be fast, free, fun and fantastic?

If you think about inviting the whole world to take on a big global challenge, the United Nations can't do that. But the Olympic Games can. The World Cup can. We have so much knowledge, especially in Indigenous communities, about how to treat the environment and how to build connections among thousands of people.

If you can create a challenge where you invite all of humanity to join a journey that's fast, free, fun and fantastic, everybody is going to join — kids and elders alike. I've done it locally, regionally and nationally. But to take on climate change, we need to go global.

Describe your vision for the global game you're building.

It's called "Jornada X" in Portuguese, or "X Journey" in English. And the idea is to save the planet — a forest, a piece of a neighborhood — one block at a time.

It starts with young people. They receive a call that's like a Matrix video that says, "Humanity isn't doing well. Society is violent and nature is dying. But you are one of a group of special kids with superpowers — things like love, helping others, strength, and friendship. In this game, in this journey, you have to awaken and release your superpower.

But here's the key — it has to be a collective superpower. They have to call at least three more friends and convince them to form a team. And anyone who joins that league gets the superpower as well. Kids love playing superheroes as a team.

As soon as they sign up, the team starts to receive missions. For instance, we might say, "Look at your neighborhood around you. What pisses you off about your neighborhood? What's wrong?" Kids and teenagers are all about criticizing. So they choose something like not having trees or having a dirty river or kids not being safe.

And the idea is that by the end of seven weeks, they have to find a solution and build it alongside their community. They don't know how to begin, but they try.

We tell them that the whole neighborhood is their game board. We explain that everything that they need to solve the problem is there in their community. So they have to find the local experts, the local materials, the local organizational patterns.

And eventually, they come up with something... like planting trees or cleaning gardens or cleaning the river.

How does the broader community get involved?

The next mission might be to find allies in your neighborhood — people who know about the problem you're trying to tackle. We ask the young people to choose the best three experts, tell them about the problem they're trying to solve and ask them to share the story of their lives. That's a trick to create connection.

These allies have the wisdom but they sometimes feel stuck and that they can't do anything. But when kids go to them, it energizes them.

Soon, we ask the kids to mobilize the support of as many adults as possible to get them involved in the hands-on work of their solution.

And when the community sees kids healing their neighborhood, they come together and say, "There's something meaningful here. We need to be part of it. We've been waiting for the government or companies to support us, but we are the people who can act to restore our neighborhood."

By belonging to a group that we love and that's doing good in the world — these are ways of energizing our collective power, our collective meaning. When you do some good, you feel like you have an identity. Your neighbor says, "Amazing. How can I support you?" You feel appreciated and so you want to do more.

By playing the game, we strengthen our personal and collective portions of confidence, joy, and willingness to do good.

You really think this could work?

Well, kids play war games all the time. They collaborate to kill people. It's not that they like death, but they want to have this kind of adrenaline. What could be more exciting? My answer is saving the planet in a way that adults haven't been able to.



Edgard Gouveia at the PxP Festival in Berlin, where he organized a circle dance. He's a believer in the power of games and is currently developing a global game "to get communities to come together and use hands-on actions to restore the environment."

Marlena Waldthausen for NPR

Our global game is a way to get communities to come together and use hands-on actions to restore the environment. By doing that, they reconnect with nature, reconnect with society and they want to do more. They dance together, they celebrate together, they share food, and it's fun. It restores community.

We've been testing it in Brazil and over 15 countries. And the kids are telling us they want to build this huge network across the planet.

So it's coming. It's coming.

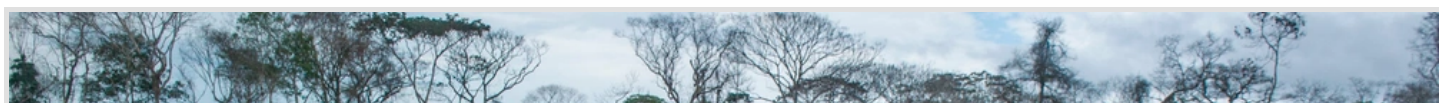
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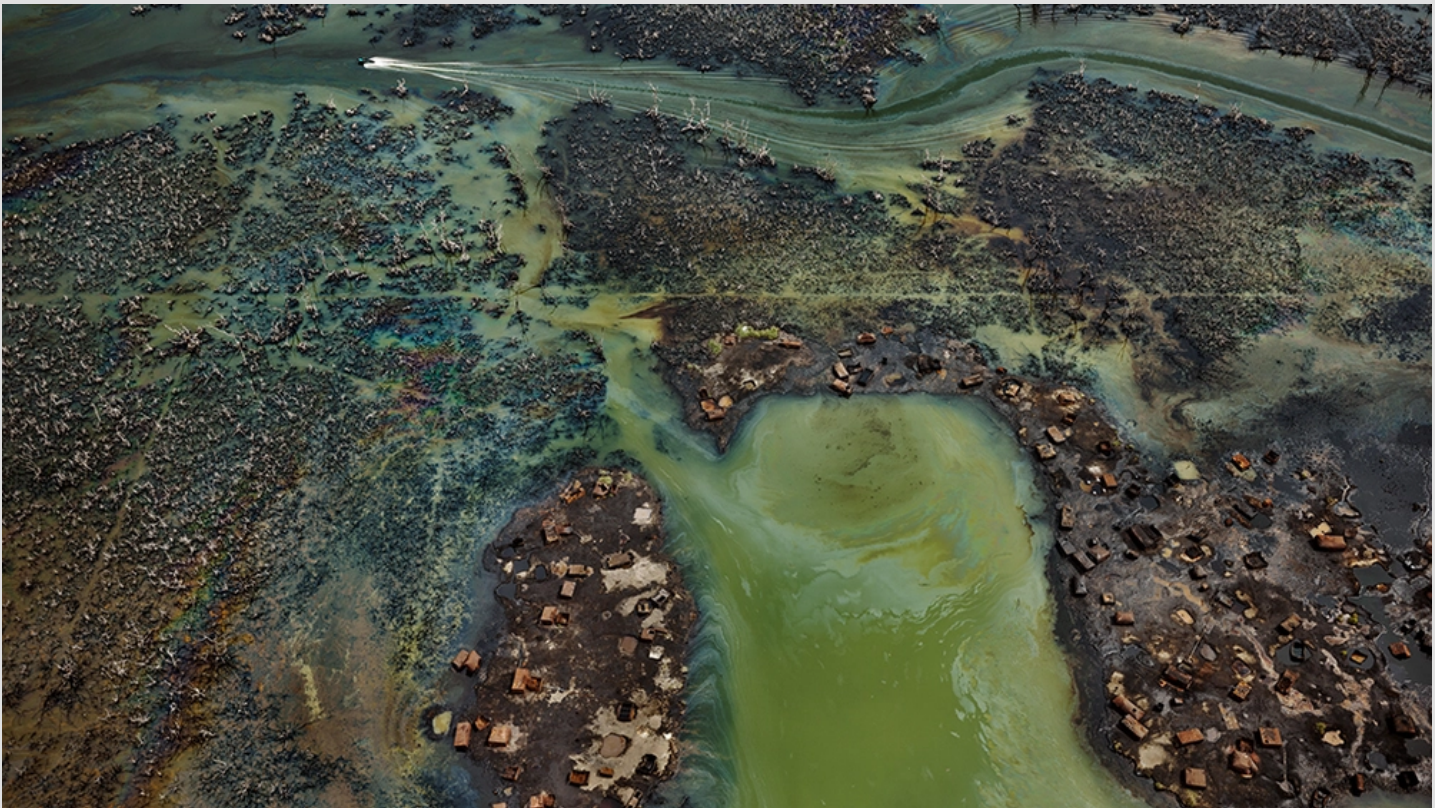
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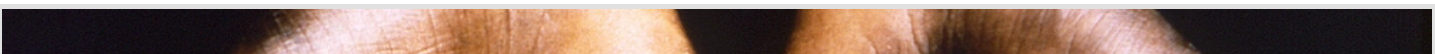
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