Dr. Alfred C. “Tuna” Snider made enduring contributions to academic debate in myriad ways. One of the most important conversations started by Snider centered on the question of whether gaming, or game theory, might function as a useful explanatory construct to illuminate competitive college debate. In a germinal article on the subject, Snider (1984) argued that although only one judge in the 1974 National Debate Tournament (NDT) judge paradigm booklet discussed gaming, it was indeed the default paradigm for many American policy debate judges. Further, in a 2003 special issue of Contemporary Argumentation & Debate devoted to the explication of Snider’s debate and gaming theories, Snider correctly argued that though the adoption of gaming as a paradigm among most debate judges was “silent,” it nonetheless functioned as a default decision-making mechanism for many, if not most critics (p.19). Indeed, we conclude that in contemporary intercollegiate debate, not only is “gaming” still the dominant paradigm practiced by most judges, it is also widely advocated and discussed among both judges and debaters. We found that at the 2016 NDT, a total of 44 out of 223 judges mentioned “gaming” or the concept of “debate as a game” in their judging philosophies. This is almost 20 percent of the overall judging pool and proof that Snider’s
foundational theories on the subject have circulated and re-emerged at a critical juncture! Over the past two decades, the gaming “paradigm” for judges in the activity has publicly proliferated and become a topic of active debate among critics who for decades only adhered to the gaming model privately, or within their own personal calculus. The influence of Snider’s gaming approach, and the discussions that surround it, remains evident in the scholarly research that has grown from these discussions (Katsulas, Herbeck, & Panetta, 1987; Schnurer, 2003; Warner, 2003; Gutierrez, 2010). While not all scholars agree with Snider’s model, the fact that it has generated such vigorous academic reaction and deliberation is proof positive of the potentialities of his schema (McGee, 2003, p.16).

There are multiple ways in which Snider’s gaming theories begin to account for the current schism in competitive intercollegiate policy debate. We argue that gaming theories might be useful for unpacking both the distinct split between “policy” debate and the more critical, theoretical, or “performative” styles of debate, a divide Snider has described as a “paradigmatic crisis” in modern policy debate (1984, p.170). First, it should be noted that the current college policy debate community is deeply divided over the question of what debate is and what it should be. On one side, many debaters and coaches indeed view debate as an academic game in which competitors assume the levers of power, and pretend through fiat power to enact legislation and then deliberate over the relative advantages and disadvantages of a specific policy proposal. For this group, the implications of the debate game do not leave the classroom, other than in terms of the education and critical thinking skills generated by participation in the game. Debate judges who view the game in this way tend to reward debates that function within the bounds of the topic; debates that follow the “formula” for making and answering arguments; debates in which the affirmative offers a plan as a change to the status quo, and in which the negative team defends the status quo through traditional arguments like disadvantages, or alternatives to the status quo in the form of counterplans. This traditional approach to debate clearly has appeal and pedagogical value for many, and focuses on learning policy issues to help debaters as they transition to public and professional life.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, there is a cadre of debaters and critics who believe that debate is not simply a game, but instead is considered more intrinsic to their lives outside of each round. For these participants, debate resembles a project, whose general mission is criticism of the traditional view of debate as a game, often as or on behalf of those voices that often have been excluded through the logic of gaming. These debaters view the debate activity as a way to empower themselves or their communities; as a way for them to attend college on a scholarship; or as a method that is instrumental in securing gainful employment after graduation. Judges who adhere to this view of debate tend to reward teams who think outside the box; who run non-traditional arguments; or who incorporate music, art, or performance into their debating strategies. These teams do not fully reject the idea that debate is a game, but rather question the existing and overly impersonal and exclusionary ways in which it is currently played. The length of this essay prevents a full interrogation of the policy/performative bifurcation in contemporary college debate, and the authors hope that the description here is not overly simplistic. Several scholars have already examined this
shift, and it continues a ripe area for further research (Dillard-Knox, 2014). In any case, this distinct split within the American college policy debate community was accurately described by, and predicted by Dr. Snider, who viewed the paradigm crisis as an inevitable outgrowth of the evolution of the debate game.

We argue that Snider’s gaming perspective continues to be relevant to the current situation in college debate, and it offers an inclusive framework within which both traditional and performative styles of policy debate can co-exist. We isolate several points of support for this conclusion, all of which emerge from Snider’s lifelong research endeavors. First, Dr. Snider always described the Lawrence Debate Union at The University of Vermont as a “big tent” program, meaning that it accommodated multiple debate formats and styles. This was especially true after 2005, when Snider introduced the team to British Parliamentary-style (or Worlds-style) debates, and moved away from a sole focus on American policy debating. Snider’s gaming model of debate operates largely in the same accessible way. The overarching model allows for polysemous meanings of what constitutes a “game”; it can mean different things to different competitors, and this is a strength of his model. In Snider’s perspective, debates about the parameters or meaning of the game are both welcome and productive. Much like how friends argue over the interpretation of a rulebook, debates about debate are a natural and likely necessary outgrowth of Snider’s gaming model. Tuna’s gaming theory of debate, while wildly influential and now pervasive in competitive college debate judging and practice, is a fairly simple construct, with only a few rules to guide the process, and the rest of the details open to interpretation and debate. For Tuna (1984), “academic debate is, really, already a game” (p. 169). Because of the dialectical process of competitive debate, and the burden of rejoinder called forth in the very nature of organized deliberation, debate was/is always already a game. According to Snider, rather than functioning to replace or supplant other methods of adjudication, “gaming provides an overarching theoretical basis for debate and a framework within which the various paradigms can compete” (p. 169). Tuna’s model also espoused adherence to baseline procedural rules to help facilitate the dialectical game of debate, including respect for time limits, and the tradition of two opposing teams debating in front of a judge, whose role was to decide the winner of the debate and to assign speaker points to each competitor. Other than the respect for those foundational assumptions of the process, Tuna’s model simply asks its audience to recognize that “as games are defined in literature, and as academic debate is now being practiced in America, debate is a game” (p. 169).

Second, the gaming model of debate allows for the proliferation of non-traditional arguments that go “beyond the mere spoken word” (Snider, 1984, p.164). Just as recent developments in rhetorical theory have begun to account for non-traditional forms of argument, the gaming model of debate creates space for visual argument, aesthetic argument, performative strategies, and myriad other forms without excluding traditional linguistic/verbal forms and approaches to debate. Rather, the deployment of alternative strategies and radical tactical argument choices are played out in the debate round, debated out, and evaluated by a judge. These so-called “clash of civilizations” debates do not end when alternative or non-traditional arguments are introduced, the debates go on and the game continues to be played until its conclusion. As Snider (2003) put it, “the dance of argument going on inside the game
may be different, but it is still inside the game” (p.21). Even in instances where the debate is decided upon “discourse, performance, or project,” the debate has still occurred “within the gaming construct” (p.21). Those who decry the end of “traditional policy debate” might best be instructed to play the game better if they perceive an unfair (or at least unexpected) rise in the efficacy of non-traditional strategies within the confines of the competition space.

Third, Snider’s (1984) gaming model allows for an activity in which both sides, indeed all participants in the debate space, have the opportunity to “communicate about alternative futures” (p.166). For traditional or more policy-oriented competitors, the gaming model would obviously allow for the use of fiat power, or the ability of both the affirmative and negative teams to pretend to control legislative authority in order to discuss the future outcomes of a given policy proposal. While Tuna’s struggles with the notion of fiat power are well documented, the gaming model would certainly not exclude debate gamers who wanted to play that way (Snider, 1987, pp.119-129). Similarly, the gaming model also accommodates non-traditional styles and approaches to debate, by providing “a method for teaching students to deal with new situations and new crises” (Snider, 1984, p.166). For debaters and judges who view the game as a survival strategy, or as training for life in the real world, it is easy to see why the gaming model of competitive debate continues to hold both emancipatory and explanatory power.

Fourth, Snider argued that the gaming model of competitive debate was a potential way to make the debate activity more accessible to the general public, and to “take the game of debate to new audiences, reaching out beyond the elite and scholarly as well as beyond the realm of rhetoricians, beyond the ivory tower, and beyond the realm of speech communication” (Snider, 2003, p.42). Tuna’s lifelong vision was to grow the game, “through outreach, public debating, and debate across the curriculum” (Snider, 2003, p.42). The gaming model, as an educational construct, functions to take the complex activities that comprise contemporary intercollegiate policy debate, and explain it to an audience of non-academics in a way that is more familiar to them. Many of us grew up playing games, and games are an easy symbolic referent for people across cultures. Thus, Snider (2003) ultimately envisioned the debate game inhabiting every classroom, as method “to activate learning in a new way” (p.42). While this has historically been understood as a way to ease the transition of technocratic policy details into a lay setting, an expansion of the “curriculum” to include more critical and non-traditional arguments is equally valuable and can help to serve and inform policy and decision-making at a state, community, or even personal level.

Finally, as a pre-emptive counter-argument to those who might argue that Snider’s gaming model of debate creates a blueprint for teams to skirt the topic, ignore the rules, adopt radical tactics and methods, and generally disrupt and denigrate the college debate activity, we would say the following (and we hope and believe that Tuna would agree): first, some of those things are not necessarily bad. That said, Snider’s gaming model does not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Rather, Tuna’s work is evolutionary, not necessarily revolutionary; it seeks to outline the basic parameters and guidelines of what the debate game should resemble, and most other aspects of the game are in fact, debate-able. For Snider, the basic foundational elements of the competitive college
debate game are few, and simple: time limits, and an agreed-upon resolution or topic. He argued that “I would defend a game with limited rules and debatable procedures, not an activity in which all rules should be boldly disregarded and violated” (Snider, 2003, p.62). Snider also explicitly denounced programs which placed restrictions on which types of arguments its teams could make in debates, and he specifically defended the rights of traditional policy debaters who went against “squad policy” by reading affirmatives with plan texts (Snider, 2003, p.83). Tuna’s gaming model is not about privileging one style of debate over another, rather, it continues to be about making the debate tent bigger and more inclusive of alternative interpretations of what debate is and should be.

While policy debate has grown and changed substantially over the last few decades, in recent years there has been renewed concern over the stability of the activity. Since the merger in 1996 between the National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA), several scholars have noted a decline in participation and accessibility by the general public to the presentation and style of policy debate (McGee, 2002; Elliot, 2000). While we do not believe that there is any one answer to this problem, and that the content of the debates themselves are often not what is the central criticism of debate’s purported problems or resulting dissolution, we do think that Snider’s model remains a useful heuristic through which to grapple with this continued and existential difficulty. Gaming, as a conceptual lens through which to view the activity’s practice, gives a new grammar to coaches and organizations seeking to define themselves in an age of budget cuts and administrative pressure. The activity has many lifelong benefits, but using the language of being a “game” gives new credence to how research skills, critical thinking, and public speaking are all related in developing students both to be more informed and to think more critically. While there is not one prescriptive that will resolve this dilemma, we think that gaming remains an inevitable and ultimately useful method for thinking about, justifying, and engaging in policy debate.

Since Tuna’s gaming theory emerged there has been a massive increase in judges and debaters who think about debate today as a game. Thus, it seems most relevant to focus on the implications of this understanding of debate instead of a simple endorsement of its continued existence. We believe that Tuna’s work rightly demonstrates that the conception of debate as a game is both inevitable and respectable, and that the clash between the two poles of the policy debate community rests upon the flawed assumption that such a division is premised on the way debate itself is perceived. While some wish to focus purely on the technocratic details and policy-making processes within the game of debate, doing so fails to recognize the fundamental similarity between debates within that sub-community and the clashes that they engage in with the more non-traditional side of our community. Stretching the rules is something that all parties are guilty of, whether it be reading too many counterplans or rejecting fiat power entirely. We would all be better served to continue Tuna’s work by arguing about why particular versions of the game are preferable and what limits should be negotiated instead of claiming that one side or the other has somehow avoided playing altogether. While this essay has focused upon and stressed its relation to American policy debate specifically, we think that Snider’s model (much like his life’s work) can transcend this specific form to most other types of public and academic debate competitions.
and formats. While some of the rules may change, these activities are ultimately all bound by a shared desire for clashing arguments and ideas together in search for personal development and the joys of competition. Starting from a place of shared similarity instead of fundamental difference is important both to further our understanding of what debate as a game implies, and continues to spread debate accessibly to all who wish to partake in its many forms, styles, and contexts.

References


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