

GAME ON!

An Educator's Guide to the



PHILOSOPHY

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Dedication

For every student who's ever
rolled the dice on growth,
flipped a card on curiosity,
guided a meeple with heart,
and dropped a tetromino to fit the unique piece of themselves into the world.

Preface: Let the GAMES Begin

It all started one game night at the table with my soon-to-be fiancé and my childhood best friend. We were laughing, arguing over the rules, and remembering when we used to play Cranium and Anomia back in elementary and middle school.

And then it hit me.

I'd always brought who I am into the classroom.

I'd always humanized myself.

Why hadn't I thought of it sooner?

This Harry-Potter-loving, Oculus-wearing, music-nerd of a fifth-grade ELA teacher was about to write another grant. Music, movement, and magic—check. AR/VR in EDU—check. But something was still missing.

It was time to bring this rekindled hobby into the fold. The teacher in me had already set the plan in motion. Making Gains by Playing Games was about to enter the chat.

The grant gave us the green light—and the funding for materials we needed to turn an idea into action. With those first sets of games in hand, I drafted the official Gamechangers proposal, securing district support for teacher pay so that the program could remain completely free for students.

In October 2021, the very first Gamechangers afterschool session began. We met twice a week after dismissal, transforming Room 405 into a mix of laughter, strategy, and learning. Students rolled dice, flipped cards, and debated rules while unknowingly practicing fractions, probability, and persuasive language.

It wasn't just fun—it was growth disguised as play. Fifth graders began stepping into leadership roles, guiding fourth graders through rounds of Sushi Go!, Spicy Farkel, and Codenames. What started as Making Gains by Playing Games quickly became a living, breathing experiment in social-emotional learning.

By winter, the program had expanded. Gamechangers wasn't just an afterschool club anymore—it was a mindset. I partnered with colleagues to weave math into our sessions, joining the tutoring rotation to reinforce skills like fraction fluency and whole-number operations through board game play. The data followed the joy: stronger relationships, deeper engagement, and a tangible rise in student confidence.

Each cycle built on the one before it—fall, winter, spring—until Gamechangers had its own rhythm, its own heartbeat. Every round of gameplay reaffirmed what I'd believed since that first night at the table: when students feel seen, valued, and invited to play, they don't just grow academically—they become.

They become thinkers.

They become teammates.

They become leaders.

They become Gamechangers.

What I realized next was that the true impact wasn't just in the cards or dice—it was in the

culture we built around them. This wasn't a club anymore. It was a philosophy. A framework that could stretch far beyond my classroom, beyond a single school year, beyond even the walls of the district that first took a chance on it.

It became an acronym. A mindset. A reminder of what every child deserves to practice through play:

G — Good sportsmanship

A — Active listening

M — Mindful manners

E — Equal participation

That's what Gamechangers has always been about—using games as the medium, but humanity as the mission. The lessons learned around that table mirror the lessons life demands every day: collaboration, courage, flexibility, empathy, and the grace to both win and lose well.

So, as you turn the page, consider this your invitation to pull up a chair, shuffle the deck, and lean in.

The GAME is on.

Chapter 1: The GAME of Life

Gamechangers has always been about more than playing games.

From the very first session, we set the tone intentionally. We talk about what it means to be a GAMER — not just someone who knows the rules of a board game, but someone who understands how to show up for others. Our GAME philosophy — Good sportsmanship, Active listening, Mindful manners, and Equal participation — is the foundation of everything we do.

These aren't just expectations posted on a wall. They're skills we practice in real time. How do we respond when we lose? How do we listen when someone explains a rule? How do we share space, take turns, and include others? How do we reset when a round doesn't go our way?

We establish these norms clearly and revisit them often, because growth doesn't happen by accident. It happens when students understand that being part of Gamechangers means being part of a community.

Through gameplay, reflection, and accountability, our GAMERs develop academic confidence, emotional regulation, and the life skills that matter long after the dice are put away. They're not just learning how to win a round — they're learning how to navigate challenges, collaborate with others, and carry those transferable skills with them wherever life takes them.

G — Good Sportsmanship

A roll of the dice teaches chance—but it also teaches choice. Good sportsmanship isn't every loss feels great; it's learning how to process disappointment and keep trying. When students cheer for others, offer rematches, or ask for advice after losing, they're practicing resilience and reflection.

In academics, that same muscle shows up when they revise essays, tackle new strategies, or persist through feedback. Each attempt is another roll—another opportunity to grow.

Winning matters less than learning how to keep playing.

Try This in Your Classroom

- **Reflect:** Ask students, "What does it mean to lose well?" and collect their responses to post as a "Classroom Code of Play."
- **Do:** Host a "Rematch Round." After a game, have players switch partners and share one strategy they'd change next time.
- **Discuss:** How do we show appreciation for effort, not just outcomes?

Game Spotlight

Skill Focus: Probability & Mental Math

Recommended Games	SEL Connection	How It Works
Spicy Farkel	Builds patience and risk management	Students roll dice to build combinations and decide when to stop—balancing probability with restraint.
Adsumudi	Fosters flexible thinking and self-challenge	Players use arithmetic operations to reach target numbers, reinforcing mental math fluency.
Proof!	Encourages focus under friendly pressure	Players race to create valid equations from a shared card set—fast-paced and self-checking.
Incan Gold	Develops decision-making and perseverance	Students choose to “press their luck” or safely return to camp—every round models calculated risk.
Skyjo	Reinforces number sense and awareness of change	Players replace cards to achieve the lowest score, practicing addition, comparison, and patience.

A — Active Listening

Flipping a card reveals information—but truly understanding the game depends on how well players listen. In Gamechangers, active listening sounded like laughter after misheard rules and quiet focus during explanations. It was the art of attention—a habit that transferred beautifully to reading groups, science labs, and everyday conversations.

Students learned that listening isn’t waiting to talk. It’s engagement in motion—an act of respect, curiosity, and collaboration that shapes every moment of learning.

Hearing is passive. Listening is power.

Try This in Your Classroom

- **Reflect:** Have students describe one peer’s idea before adding their own during a class discussion.
- **Do:** Play “Rule Relay.” Whisper game directions down a line of players and compare the final version to the original. Discuss how clarity and attention change outcomes.
- **Discuss:** What helps us feel heard—and what helps us listen better?

Game Spotlight

Skill Focus: Communication & Comprehension

Recommended Games	SEL Connection	How It Works
Codenames	Builds teamwork and clarity under pressure	Players give one-word clues to guide teammates toward correct words—precision and listening are key. Note: can be easily adapted using classroom vocabulary lists for ELA, science, or social studies.
One Night Ultimate Series (Werewolf or Super Villains)	Encourages critical listening and social inference	Players take on secret roles and use short nighttime prompts to deduce who’s who—listening and recall drive every decision. Note: remove the “Drunk” card from all classroom play.
Telestrations	Promotes humor and perspective-taking	Students alternate between drawing and describing phrases, highlighting how easily communication shifts meaning.
Wavelength	Deepens empathy and expressive language	Teams discuss abstract spectrums (“hot-cold,” “hero-villain”) and guess

Outnumbered

Reinforces reasoning and collaborative communication

where a hidden target falls based on one player's clue.

Players defend a city using math-based attacks—strategic listening and shared problem-solving keep everyone engaged.

M — Mindful Manners

Guiding a meeple across the board reminds us: every move affects someone else.

Mindful manners aren't just about saying please and thank you. They're about awareness—of tone, timing, and teamwork. In *Gamechangers*, we practiced greeting opponents, sharing supplies, and taking turns without prompting. Over time, those simple acts of respect reshaped our classroom culture. Students began noticing how they played, not just if they won.

Mindfulness here isn't meditation—it's social consciousness. It's recognizing that the energy you bring to the table shapes everyone else's experience there.

Mindfulness is noticing what matters—and who matters—around the table.

Try This in Your Classroom

- **Reflect:** Ask, "What makes someone great to play or work with?" Record responses to create a shared "Mindful Player" anchor chart.
- **Do:** Before each new round or project, start with a "Meeple Moment"—students share one act of kindness or gratitude from the previous session.
- **Discuss:** How can we recover when we forget our manners or make a move that hurts someone's feelings?

Game Spotlight

Skill Focus: Emotional Regulation & Social Awareness

Recommended Games	SEL Connection	How It Works
Carcassonne	Teaches patience and shared-space awareness	Players build a map collaboratively while competing for territory, requiring respect and turn-based focus.
The Mind	Builds concentration and calm cooperation	Without speaking, players play cards in ascending order—learning to read others' pacing and maintain composure.
Mysterium Park	Strengthens empathy and interpretation	"Ghost" players give abstract image clues while others infer meaning—patience and tone-awareness are key.
Really Loud Librarians	Encourages balance between energy and control	Teams shout out words that fit categories without overlapping—students

Mantis

Promotes humor and
emotional flexibility

learn to channel excitement
productively.

Fast-paced color-matching
game that models healthy
reactions to unexpected
outcomes and competition.

E — Equal Participation

Everyone deserves a seat at the table—and a turn that matters.

Equal participation isn't just fairness; it's belonging in action. In the classroom and at the game table, that means making sure each student feels seen, heard, and capable of contributing something meaningful. When every voice shapes the outcome, learning becomes shared success.

In *Gamechangers*, the tables weren't just filled with players—they were filled with possibilities. Quiet thinkers found space to shine. Confident voices learned to listen. And each game became a mirror for the kind of world we're trying to build: one where everyone gets to play.

Equity at the table builds empathy beyond it.

Try This in Your Classroom

- **Reflect:** Have students track participation patterns during group work. Who tends to lead? Who observes quietly? Discuss how each role adds value and how balance can make teams stronger.
- **Do:** Create rotating “Table Roles” (Facilitator, Encourager, Timekeeper, Clarifier) for games or projects so every student contributes in a new way each round.
- **Discuss:** What helps everyone feel included? How does it feel when your idea changes the group's direction?

Game Spotlight

Skill Focus: Collaboration & Inclusive Problem-Solving

Recommended Games	SEL Connection	How It Works
Forbidden Series (Island, Desert, Sky, Jungle)	Promotes teamwork and shared responsibility	Players work together to explore, strategize, and survive—every role and decision impacts the group's success.
Set	Reinforces focus and equity through simultaneous play	All players compete at the same time, building pattern recognition and fairness into every round.
Waffle (wafflegame.net)	Encourages collective reasoning and pattern-building	Players collaborate to rearrange letters and solve word grids—group play transforms this daily puzzle into a shared challenge.
Connections (The New York Times)	Builds voice equity and perspective-taking	Players or teams group related words into sets, sparking discussion about

Dixit

Fosters empathy, creativity,
and interpretive thinking

how people think and
categorize differently.

Players share clues inspired
by surreal images, inviting
multiple perspectives and
valuing unique points of
view.

Chapter 2: Building the GAMER Brand

Our branding is not accidental. Details matter.

Every word. Every icon. Every color choice. It's all intentional.

The name itself is a statement. We're not just playing games — we're changing the game. Changing how students see learning. Changing how they respond to challenge. Changing how they interact with peers. In sports, a “gamechanger” is the moment that shifts momentum. In life, it's the experience that alters your trajectory in a meaningful way. That's what this program is designed to be.

Board games are not filler time. They are structured opportunities for critical thinking, communication, resilience, and collaboration. Every session is built to move beyond entertainment and into transformation.

And our logo tells that story.

The Meeple

At the center is the meeple — the universal board game symbol for “the people.” That's intentional. Because Gamechangers is people-first. Always has been. Yes, we love worker placement games. But more importantly, the meeple represents our commitment to each GAMER in the room. The relationships. The belonging. The understanding that growth happens in community.

The Tetromino

The tetromino nods to tile placement and spatial reasoning, but it means more than that. Think about Tetris — pieces don't always come in the order you want. You adapt. You rotate. You make it fit. That's life. The skills our GAMERs develop here — flexibility, problem-solving, persistence — are designed to transfer. They fit wherever life places them next.

The Pawn

The pawn represents strategy and foresight. It may look small, but in chess, it can change everything. That's how we view our students. Capable. Strategic. Growing. We teach our GAMERs to think ahead, weigh options, and understand consequences. Thoughtful decisions win games — and they build strong humans.

The Die

The die represents chance, risk, and stepping into the unknown. Sometimes you roll big. Sometimes you Farkel. Either way, you learn. The die reminds us that growth requires courage. It requires trying. It requires being willing to step outside of comfort and trust that even the unpredictable moments carry lessons.

Together, these symbols represent more than categories of games. They represent the skills we intentionally build: strategy, adaptability, community, and resilience.

Because Gamechangers isn't about raising skilled gamers.

It's about raising thoughtful, capable, collaborative humans who know how to navigate the board — and the world.

Appendix A: Lesson Plans



FARKEL: Math, Strategy, SEL & ELA Through Gameplay

Flexible Grades: 3–8

Time Options: 45–60 minutes (single block) OR 2 days (Game Day + Analysis/Writing Day)

Group Size: 3–5 students per group

Teacher Overview

Big Idea

Students practice risk vs. reward decision-making through gameplay and connect it to resilience, sportsmanship, and emotional regulation. Students then use their game results as a dataset to practice operations, fractions, probability reasoning, and graphing, and finish with a personal narrative (memoir-style) reflection.

Why Farkel Works

- Immediate consequences → authentic SEL practice
- Scoring creates natural multi-step computation
- “Farkel frequency” and “highest round score” create clean, meaningful graphable class trends
- Risk-taking is an easy bridge to real-life writing

Student-Friendly Learning Targets

- I can calculate and track points accurately using the scoring chart.
- I can explain my choices about risk vs. reward.
- I can stay calm and show good sportsmanship when I Farkel or lose points.
- I can use class data to make graphs and describe trends.
- I can write a personal narrative about a real risk I took and what I learned.

Common Core Standards Alignment

Math (CCSS)

Operations & Algebraic Thinking - 3.OA.D.8, 4.OA.A.3, 5.OA.A.1–2 (multi-step problems, reasoning)

Number & Operations in Base Ten - 4.NBT.B.4, 5.NBT.B.5 (multi-digit computation during scoring)

Statistics & Probability - 6.SP.B.4–5 (summarize, describe distributions) 7.SP.C.5–8 (probability models, comparing theoretical vs. experimental)

ELA (CCSS)

Writing - W.3.3 / W.4.3 / W.5.3 / W.6.3: narrative writing about real experiences

Speaking & Listening - SL.3.1–SL.6.1: collaborative discussion norms

Language - L.3–6.6: domain vocabulary (probability, outcome, strategy, risk, resilience)

21st Century Skills

- Critical thinking & decision-making
- Collaboration
- Communication

- Resilience & adaptability
- Self-management & emotional regulation
- Data literacy (collecting, analyzing, presenting)

Materials

Per group:

- 6 dice
- 1 scoring chart (print 1 per table)
- 1 score sheet per student

Whole class:

- Class data chart (teacher master)
- Graph templates (or graph paper)
- Pencils, clipboards (optional)

Spicy Variant option:

- Use dice with a designated “spicy” face (red pip/marker). If you don’t have spicy dice, use a red Sharpie to color one face on each die, or define “spicy” as rolling a 1 on the first die (consistent rule, not random).



Lesson Flow (Minute-by-Minute Script)

0–5 min — Hook + Purpose (Teacher Script)

Say:

“Today we’re learning how math, strategy, and emotions connect. In Farkel, you can earn points quickly—but if you take too big of a risk, you might Farkel and score zero for that round. We’ll practice two things at once: smart math and good sportsmanship.”

Ask (quick turn-and-talk):

1. “What’s a risk?”
2. “When is it smart to stop?”
3. “What helps you stay calm when something doesn’t go your way?”

5–10 min — Model One Turn + How to Record

- Project/hand out scoring chart
- Roll 6 dice in front of class
- Think aloud:
 - Identify scoring dice
 - Decide stop vs roll
 - Model recording on score sheet
- SEL language:

“If I Farkel, I reset. I don’t blame the dice or other players. I learn and try again.”

10–30 min — Gameplay (Teacher Circulates)

Teacher job:

- Check scoring accuracy
- Watch SEL behaviors
- Prompt strategy talk:
 - “Why did you stop?”
 - “What’s your risk here?”
 - “What will you do differently next round?”

30–45 min — Data & Graphing Debrief

- Students compute totals, farkels, highest round score
- Teacher collects class data into master chart
- Students complete at least one graph + analysis questions

45–60 min — ELA Narrative (or Day 2)

- Students complete narrative organizer
- Draft memoir/personal narrative entry

Farkel Rules

A) Teacher Rules

Turn Steps

1. Roll all 6 dice.
2. Set aside at least one scoring die or scoring combination.
3. Add those points to your turn total.
4. Choose:
 - STOP → bank points into your overall score
 - ROLL AGAIN → roll remaining dice to try for more points
5. If you roll and get no scoring dice, you FARKEL → you score 0 for that round and your turn ends.
6. Hot Dice: If you score using all 6 dice, you may roll all 6 again in the same turn.

Classroom-Friendly Win Options

- Timed: play 15–20 minutes; highest score wins
- Equal rounds: everyone plays the same number of rounds; highest score wins
- Target score: first to 1,000 (grades 3–4), 2,000–5,000 (grades 5–8)

B) Kid-Friendly Rules

Farkel is a risk game!

1. Roll all 6 dice.
2. Keep any scoring dice.
3. Choose: STOP and keep your points OR ROLL AGAIN.
4. If you roll and nothing scores, you FARKEL and get 0 points for that round.

5. If you score with all 6 dice, you get HOT DICE and can roll all 6 again.
6. Highest score at the end wins!

Scoring Chart (Print for Each Table)

- Single 1 = 100
- Single 5 = 50
- Three 1s = 300
- Three 2s = 200
- Three 3s = 300
- Three 4s = 400
- Three 5s = 500
- Three 6s = 600

Special combos

- Four of a kind = 1,000
- Five of a kind = 2,000
- Six of a kind = 3,000
- Straight (1–6) = 1,500
- Three pairs = 1,500
- Two triplets = 2,500

Spicy Farkel Bonus Variant

Spicy Rule

If a scoring combination includes one or more spicy dice, double that combination's score for each spicy die included.

Examples:

- Combo = 400 points with 1 spicy die → 800
- Combo = 500 points with 2 spicy dice → 2,000
- Straight = 1,500 with 2 spicy dice → 6,000 ($1,500 \times 4$)

Classroom Tip:

Use spicy as a bonus extension after students master basic scoring. It creates strong multiplication practice and great "risk vs reward" discussion.

Graphing Activities (Templates + Questions)

Graph 1: Bar Graph — “How Many Times Did We Farkel?”

X-axis: Student/Group

Y-axis: # of Farkels

Analysis Questions

1. What is the class trend: low, medium, or high Farkels?
2. Who had the most Farkels? What choices might explain it?
3. Did “rolling again” more often lead to more Farkels? Use evidence.

Graph 2: Line Plot — “Highest Round Scores”

Use bins (choose by grade):

- Grades 3–5: 0–200, 201–400, 401–600, 601–800, 801+
- Grades 6–8: 0–250, 251–500, 501–750, 751–1000, 1001+

Analysis Questions

1. Which score range appears most often?
2. How many students scored above 600 in a single round?
3. If spicy was used, how did it change high-score frequency?

Graph 3 (Optional): Class Average Points Per Turn

Student computes:

My average = Total score ÷ # rounds played = _____

Class computes:

Class average = sum of totals $\div$ sum of rounds = _____

Compare:

Did “safe stoppers” or “risk rollers” have a higher average?

Student Score Sheet

Name: _____ Date: _____ Group: _____

Round	# Dice Rolled	Points This Round	Farkel?
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1			
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2			
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3			
---	--	--	--

4			
---	--	--	--

5			
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6			
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7			
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8			
---	--	--	--

9			
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10			
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Quick SEL check each round:

"I stayed calm if I Farked." YES / SOMETIMES / NOT YET

Class Data Collection Sheet

Student/Group	# Farkels	Highest Round Score	Total Score	Notes (risk style: safe/ risky)

Math Extensions

A) Operations & Spicy Multiplication

1. A combo scores 400. It includes 1 spicy die. New score = ____
2. A combo scores 500. It includes 2 spicy dice. New score = ____
3. A straight scores 1,500 and includes 2 spicy dice. New score = ____
4. You banked 750, then banked 620. Total = ____

B) Fractions & Rates

1. You played 8 rounds and Farked 3 times. Fraction = ____
2. You Farked 3 out of 10 rounds. Write as a percent = ____% (grades 5–8)
3. 6 out of 24 students Farked 4+ times. Fraction = ____ Simplified = ____

C) Probability & Risk Reasoning (Experimental vs. “Common Sense”)

1. When rolling fewer dice, why might Farkels increase?
2. Which was riskier for you: rolling 2 dice or 5 dice? Use your data.
3. If you notice you Farkel most often when rolling 1 die, what strategy could you use?

D) Statistics & Data (Upper Grades)

1. Find the mean number of Farkels in the class.

2. What is the median highest-round score?
3. Are there outliers? Who, and why?

ELA Extension (Memoir / Personal Narrative)

Writing Prompt

“In Farkel, losing everything in a round can feel frustrating, but it teaches you to reset. Describe a moment in your life when something didn’t go your way. How did you respond, and how did it shape you?”

Speaking & Listening

Students share in pairs:

- Partner A tells story (1 minute)
- Partner B summarizes what they heard (active listening)
- Switch

Differentiation (Flexible 3–8)

Supports

- Use 4 dice instead of 6
- Provide pre-highlighted scoring combos
- Score-check buddy system
- “Stop rule” for support groups (must bank after 2 rolls)

Challenges

- Require justification: “I rolled again because...”
- Compare experimental vs. theoretical expectations (grades 7–8)
- Write a strategy reflection paragraph: safe vs risky play

Optional Add-On: Exit Ticket (Fast)

1. Today I learned that risk...
2. A strategy I used was...
3. One graph trend I noticed was...

SEL Reflection Sheet

Statement	Yes	Sometimes	Not Yet
I stayed calm when I Farked			
I didn't blame others			
I encouraged someone else			
I used respectful words			
I tried again after setbacks			

Short response:

1. One moment I showed sportsmanship was...
2. One moment I wish I handled differently was...
3. Next time I will...

Teacher Observation Rubric

Skill	4 – Consistent	3 – Usually	2 – Sometimes	1 – Rarely
Math accuracy	Accurate scoring + checks others	Minor errors	Frequent errors	Unable to score
Decision-making	Explains risk choices with reason	Some reasoning	Little reasoning	Impulsive
Emotional regulation	Calm; resets after Farkel	Minor frustration	Needs reminders	Disruptive
Sportsmanship	Encourages peers; respectful	Neutral	Occasional negativity	Poor sportsmanship
Collaboration	Shares space, turns, materials	Mostly cooperative	Needs prompts	Conflicts