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CHANGING THE GAME

We've seen that a game can change. We've seen that the very game we're playing can become something we never intended it to be.

We made the change. It changed because of the way we were playing it.

It changed for the worse when we lost control. We didn't just lose control, we actually surrendered it to other people with whom we weren't even playing. As a result, though we were all involved in the game as much as we possibly could be, none of us was able to enjoy it. We couldn't even see that it was just a game, that it wasn't for real, that we were only playing.

It changed for the better when we discovered a different source of control. When that kid took his chair with him during the game of musical chairs, he established for us all a new way of seeing the game we were playing together.

But suppose what we really want to do is play a game together, and every time we think we understand what game we are playing, somebody changes it. Suppose we are feeling so playful that we destroy the game together. If that's what we want to do—destroy the game—then everything's fine. But suppose we really want to play a *game*.

An example:

We start out with a game of dodgeball. We've been playing it for about five minutes. We're beginning to get the sense of what it means to play it well. At the same time, we're not quite committed to the game—we're not really into it yet. You're an ender and you throw the ball at me. I catch it. Now, according to what we understand to be the

rules of the game, we're supposed to trade roles. Since I caught the ball, I get rewarded. Since you didn't hit me, you get punished.

In a moment of high cuteness, I decide to keep the ball. I just stand there, holding the ball against my stomach. And then, as soon as I notice that other people have noticed, I run.

So people start running after me. I dribble teasingly. I dash madly. I run circles. The chase is on.

Then, just as it seems we've agreed that we're playing some kind of chasing game, I throw the ball to you.

You're shocked, so you throw the ball back to me. I'm tired, so I throw the ball back to you. Then you notice that others have noticed, so you take the ball and run. And then, as soon as you see someone getting too close, you throw the ball back to me.

Ah, keep away. All right. Good game. But then, when somebody gets the ball, instead of throwing it or running with it, she lies on top of it.

People try to get it away from her. Other people try to keep them from getting close to her.

Another game. What game is it? I don't know, do you?

Somebody steps on somebody else's hand. Somebody else steps on somebody else's hair. Some people really want to get the ball back. They're serious. They really want to start a game. Others don't know what's happening. Others are laughing hysterically.

It's all play and no game, all release and no control. No one can find the center. We have lost all responsibility—to the game, to the community, to ourselves.

We are not playing well at all.

Of Play and Games

There is a very fine balance between play and game, between control and release, lightness and heaviness, concentration and spontaneity. The function of our play community is to maintain that balance, to

negotiate between the game-as-it-is-being-played and the game-as-we-intend-it-to-be. It is for that reason that we maintain the community.

On the one hand we have the playing mind—innovative, magical, boundless. On the other is the gaming mind—concentrated, determined, intelligent. And on the hand that holds them both together we have the notion of playing well.

The Need for Change

The balance between the playing mind and the gaming mind is never at an equilibrium. There is a dynamic tension between these two—a dialogue. Playing well means playing within that dialogue.

So the definition of playing well is the result of an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation. It changes as we do, sometimes drastically, sometimes subtly.

Suppose we're playing a game of volleyball. We're playing the regulation game: teams, rotation, points. It just so happens that I'm getting a little tired of playing that way. Something has changed. I don't like the way I'm playing anymore.

I could just walk away from the game. There are boundaries, and I could just step outside if I wanted to. But we are playing with small teams. I would be missed. I owe it to my team to stick it out until the game is over.

At the same time, I know I'm not playing well. The game isn't feeling right for me. My mind is wandering. I'm missing. I'm thinking about taking a nap. I'm wondering if the net is too high for me to put my toes through. I'm watching the shadows play. In fact, I'm not only missing the ball, I'm missing altogether.

So, there are times when playing the game as it is being played is a violation of the convention of the play community. I'm actually, in some way, interfering with the intention of the community. I'm not even trying to play well.

Though it is only fair, in terms of the game we're playing, that I continue playing, that I stick it out until the very end—though it is not

only fair but also, in terms of my commitment to the team, obligatory that I remain in the game—I am cheating the community by the way I'm playing. The game is small enough for me to be felt. The balance between the playing mind and the gaming mind, between me and the other players is sensitive enough to perceive the shift. I am causing it to wobble. People are trying to play around me. There is a hole where I stand that is draining energy from the game.

It therefore becomes incumbent on me to do something about it. I could announce my problem to others in the community, but that would stop the game. I could quit, but that would be unfair to my team.

I can only see two other possibilities: I could try to focus myself in some way so that I could get back into the game, or I could try to somehow change the game itself.

If I select the first alternative, no one needs to know about it. I can withdraw within myself and argue myself back into the game. I can instruct myself to focus on the ball, to watch the seams, to notice how the light hits it.

But it isn't working. I'm focusing so intently on the ball that I forget to hit it. Somehow, the inner balance is getting shakier and shakier.

This leaves me with only one alternative.

I recognize that it is not always appropriate to change the game. It requires a sensitivity to the needs of the community as well as to my own needs. I am not sure that I am able to be sensitive enough to anything.

This leaves me with no alternatives at all.

Finding Permission

I happen to notice that I did get more involved in the game when I was able to play close to the net. Perhaps my inner wanderings have something to do with the fact that I'm playing back.

During our next rotation, I go up to the net and ask if it's OK if I play there. Strangely enough, it is.

After all of this internal mishmosh, I discover that all I had to do was ask—that the permission was there all the time, and all I had to do was get it.

Here I was, trying to be so responsive to the needs of the community, and I totally forgot that the community we have created together was in response to the needs of each of us. My teammates knew that I was having trouble focusing on the game. It is in their own interest that I find the position that lets me play well.

Sure I can play front. Sure I can stay there as long as I need to. If it helps our game, why not?

The Bent Rule

We didn't really change a rule, we bent it. We made an exception, and it was clear to all of us that it was all right. If making an exception helps us have an exceptional game, anything is all right.

As the Well-Timed cheat helps restore the game to the players, the bent rule helps return the players to the game.

For example, suppose you're playing solitaire. Now you've gone through a modicum of effort to lay out the cards in their proper and officially authorized array. You have reached the point of play at which, though the game has been going for quite a while, you find you are about to lose. You almost won, but not quite.

Everyone knows that cheating at solitaire is an example of poor character. Even though there's no one around to call you on your cheating. Even though the only one you could possibly be cheating is yourself.

At this point in the game, either because of your highly evolved ability to rationalize, or because of your desire to see the game through, you decide to bend a rule. But, in order to maintain your sense of respectability, you decide to allow yourself only one small bend in one small rule. And then, if you still lose, you'll admit failure and pick up the cards and start all over again.

Now you're not doing a particularly admirable thing. You've admitted to yourself that, even if you win, you'll have won only because you cheated. Well, not cheated, exactly, but bent a rule. So in fact what you've done is to change the game. You're honest enough to admit to yourself that actually, in terms of the unchanging game, you have in fact lost. But, well, look at it this way: Now that you've lost, you can make up a new goal—how about seeing how long it takes to win? Maybe you'll have to bend a couple of rules. Maybe you'll even have to spindle, fold, and otherwise mutilate them, but, well, what does it matter now that you've lost?

So, you merely take the top card off the pile and place it underneath. Oh, joy! Behold what new possibilities have emerged!

The Borrowed Rule

If bending or breaking a rule is a bit too disturbing for the gaming mind to handle, we can employ a device which conforms a bit more at least to the letter of the law. We can borrow a rule from another game and attach it to ours.

After all, it's a real rule. It just wasn't part of the game when we started playing. But there's precedent.

Let's go back to your game of solitaire. As you know, there are many kinds of solitaire. In one kind, the rule is that you turn over every third card. In another, you turn over each card.

So, if turning over the third card, when you're playing a game like Canfield, is not yielding positive results, well then you can turn over every card, as in the game of Las Vegas solitaire, and see if that works.

Then, in some solitaires, you build up, in others, you build down. In some you play red on black, in others you play without regard to suit or color.

Thus, whenever another form of solitaire seems more advantageous to you, you simply switch to that form—announcing to yourself, of course, that you have in fact failed, and you're just employing this particular modification for the fun of it.

Sacredness

Rules are made for the convenience of those who are playing. What is fair at one time or in one game may be inhibiting later on. It's not the game that's sacred, it's the people who are playing.

It might have been true that, because of the way we were playing volleyball together, the rotation rule was superfluous. Suppose none of us cared what positions we were playing. Suppose the fact was that nobody wanted to stay in any particular position at all, that we were able to play together well enough no matter what position anyone held. Then it's to no one's advantage to keep the rotation rule. Then, you might as well let me play where I want to play. Then we can all let each other play where we want to play.

Breaking or bending or borrowing a rule is only bad when we attempt to conceal it from each other or when it is done to the detriment of another player. When that happens, it's cheating for real. It violates not the sacredness of a rule but the spirit of the play community.

Whenever we want to change the game, it's safest to make an open admission that that is what we're trying to do. Cheating for real is something that we try to conceal from each other. Telling each other helps keep the game in play.

It's just like Manny Kant used to say: "If I want to find out whether what I'm doing is OK, all I have to do is imagine what it would be like if everybody knew about it and did it too."

Bigger Changes

There are many rules and, in fact, quite a few conventions which can be changed without drastically changing the game.

For example, we could play volleyball with a somewhat larger or smaller ball. We could increase or decrease the number of players on a side. We could raise or lower the net.

None of these changes would keep us from playing volleyball. Any of them could help us play a better game.

I am not advocating changing the game for the sake of novelty. I am not saying that it is better to change the game than to keep it the same. I am merely pointing out that there are times—more times than one would think—when it is remarkably useful to the community as a whole and to the players in particular to have the power to change some of the rules.

The efficacy of change is, once again, a question of timing. If the change comes out of a realization that the game, as we are playing it, is no longer appropriate—if it is unquestionably clear that we are either playing too much or gaming too much—the change will be accepted because the change is necessary.

If it is the right time, we can change anything.

We can make up any kind of rule that we want to. We could make the court three feet wide. We could play volleyball with balloons. We could give everybody a ball. We could play with two nets. With four nets. With a moving net. Without a net. We could play silently, in the dark, with a luminescent ball. We could play on the ice. There could be three teams. Four. One.

As long as we make sure that it is the right time and that everyone understands and agrees to the rules, we can do anything we want to and still be playing well. OK, we might not be playing *the* game. But there is no "*the* game" for a play community. Any game whatever, as long as we are playing it well, is *the* game.

Too Much Change

Then there is the time when we become so fascinated by our power to change the game that we tend to get carried away by it all. We become so intent on celebrating our newly regained authority that all we want to do is change rules. We never keep the same rule for longer than five minutes. We change everything: sides, scores, balls, language, clothes. You name it, we change it.

At the beginning it's cute. It feels good to have this power back. It feels good to know that we have permitted each other to use it. However, after a while it tends to get a little disorienting. We are so excited about finding out all the wonderful ways we can change a game that we suddenly, crashingly, become aware of the fact that we no longer have a game to play.

If we are in a good humor at that particular moment, then everything is wonderful and we are restored. Maybe we will all go for a swim or something. Maybe we are actually able to settle on a particular variation and play it without changing anything.

If, on the other hand, one or several or all of us are not in such a state of willing hilarity, we could wind up without a community. It could happen. It has happened. A few of us feel, each, individually, that everybody else knows what's happening and we don't. We could feel that things have gotten out of hand, that people are being too silly. We could feel that we are somehow being attacked by all this wonderfulness.

We want to play, but we can find nothing solid to play with. There is no game for us to play. So we lose contact. We lose our sense of control. With loss of control goes loss of safety. With loss of safety goes loss of the willingness to play. Without the willingness to play, there is no play community.

Restoring Balance

When we come back to the realization that the point of changing the game is so that we can play it well together, we discover that it is a more delicate task than keeping a game going, which, in turn, is a more delicate task than finding one to start with. The balance grows ever finer.

Analogy: Think of a game as a sensitive instrument—a microscope, maybe. We can put anything at all, as long as it's small enough, under that microscope. Under low power we can see broad terrains. This is fascinating. We want to see them in greater detail. But as we increase

the power of our microscope, we discover that it becomes more difficult to find the proper focus.

Another analogy: One button turns the TV on. Another button selects the channel. A third one is for fine turning. If you don't know how to work the buttons, you're not going to get the picture you're looking for.

The change thing can go too far. Eventually, we wind up totally unwilling to change the game any more. And then we go about trying to figure out how we can change the people who are playing it.

We have not only gone too far, we have gone completely off.

If anything needs change, it is much more logical to change the game than it is to change the people who are playing.

It is logical because the game isn't for real. It's something made up. It's something made up for the sake of those who are playing.

It's not only more logical, it's even wiser. If we all agree to change the game, the worst that can happen is that we'll wind up with a lousy game. But if our purpose becomes to change each other....Frankly, I'd rather not even think about it.

So let us say that our play community has proclaimed a new morality, and inscribed in gold on our flag is the motto IF YOU CAN'T PLAY IT, CHANGE IT, and woven into our banner are the words IF IT HELPS, CHEAT.

Now we find ourselves with an amazing, almost overwhelming freedom. We can change anything. Yes, there are regulations, but we are the ones who make them. There is no other authority than ours. We are the officials.

If we weren't so sure of our commonality—if we had any doubt about the objective, which we all share, of finding a game we can play well together—we simply couldn't handle all this freedom. We would get lost in it. We would take things personally.

Changing the game is the most delicate of all the things we're doing together. When we play a proven game—a game that has been played before—we are presented with a system of rules that has a balance of its

own. Even if we ourselves have never played that game before, if the game is, officially, a game that works, we begin playing it with the knowledge that it is fair. We know that there are reasons for the rules.

Suppose we're playing tic-tac-toe. Maybe this is the first time we've played it. We don't really have to ask why we should be trying to get three instead of two or four in a row. We could try it that way, but ordinarily we wouldn't. We play the game according to its rules because we believe that the rules have been all thought out—that if we tried playing for two or four in a row the game wouldn't play well, we wouldn't be able to play it well together.

It just so happens that we are right. Tic-tac-toe doesn't work if we try for two in a row. Well, yes, we did try it. Curiosity, you know. But the first player always won. That wasn't very much fun—especially for the second player. But even for the first player as well: Who wants to play a game that you win before you start? Call that fun? Call that a Well-Played game?

So it seems to us that the game has been all figured out already—that every rule is what it should be. It's true. The game is as it should be. But it might also be the case that we aren't playing it well. That, in fact, we should change something about the game.

What would happen if we changed one of the rules?

We would definitely disturb the balance of the game. We would probably have to change other rules to restore it.

So we're on very shaky ground. Once we begin to change a rule, the only framework that is keeping us together is our intention to play well. Suppose it happens that you, playful person that you are, completely assured that you've no other goal than playing well and joyously—suppose it happens that you begin to wonder about my motivations. Maybe all I really want to do is beat you. Maybe that's why I'm so interested in changing the rules. I mean, what makes you so sure that I'm that community-minded?

All of which is to say that we cannot even begin to explore ways of changing the game until we are certain that we share the intention to

play well together. This certainty is not found in the rules of any game. It lies in the nature of the relationship we are able to build with each other—in the establishment and the continual reaffirmation of our intention of playing well. It is found and maintained through the conventions of the play community.

But we have already played together enough to know that the game isn't really so very important.

Let's go back to tic-tac-toe. We now know how it's supposed to be played. We've played it many times. We know that we can play it well. We also know that the game isn't very interesting anymore. We've figured it out. When we play, the first player either wins or ties.

But we're interested in playing some tic-tac-toe-like game. We have pencils and plenty of paper. Rather than try to invent a new game, we decide that it would be easiest to start with one we already know.

Let's look at some of the things that we can change.

First of all, we know that you're supposed to play Tic-Tac-Toe on a cross-hatch board made of two vertical lines crossed by two horizontal lines.

Given our license to play, we also know that we could change how it looks. We could make it bigger or smaller or any way we wanted to. We could have five horizontal lines and nine vertical lines. Or three and six. Or eight and twenty.

Granted, if we get too creative with the grid designs, we'll wind up with something beautiful to behold but impossible to play with. Further granted, whatever way we change the design, we're going to have to change other rules to restore the balance of the game. So maybe first we should take a look at the rules and get some sense of the range available to us.

One rule we know about is that the game is supposed to end when somebody gets three in a row. We could easily change that. We could make it four in a row, or five, or a hundred. Then we'd get to use the bigger grid. But how big should we make it? We'll have to play with it for a while to find out.

Or, maybe we'd like something other than a row. A circle maybe. How about three touching each other? Or four? Or how about four opposite each other?

There's a lot to explore. Maybe too much already. Maybe we should stop and just play with what we've already discovered. Let's see what the changes do. Let's see which changes we like best.

Well, we can always do that later. This is fun. Let's see what else we can change.

The rule is that whoever gets three in a row first is the winner. We could change the part about being first. We could say that whoever gets three in a row second is the winner. Why not? Maybe it'd be more fun that way. Maybe we could play better that way.

Then there's the rule about the tie game. Who says the tie game means that nobody wins? Maybe we both should win. Would that work? Would it still be fun?

Actually, I remember reading in one of my books on games about a version of tic-tac-toe called "Old Nick". This is the way it is played: Whenever a game is tied, the points go to Old Nick, and the next player to win also wins all of Old Nick's points. Sounds good. Sounds like it would add a tension that tic-tac-toe is lacking. Or maybe we could see if, at the end of twenty games, say, Old Nick has more points that either of us, and, if he does, then we would have both lost to him. Interesting, maybe.

Any other rules?

Well, how about the rule that you use X and O? Maybe we could use I and U. Of course, that wouldn't change the game any. We can really use any symbols that we want to as long as we can tell them apart. We could use colors instead of symbols. It wouldn't make a difference, really.

Maybe we like the way the game looks more when we use colors than when we use letters. That's reason enough to try it. Except that what we want to do is change the game so that we can play it better. And changing the symbols isn't enough of a change. It's interesting,

though, that we can change some of the rules and not change the game at all.

So let's look for rules to change that really make a difference, that will really help us find the right game.

How about the rule that says you're supposed to draw a line through your three letters to prove that you've got three in a row? It helps us make sure that a win is really a win. But the strategies would be the same whether or not we use that rule.

So, to make the game different, to change it significantly, we have to find a rule to change that will result in a change of strategies.

I've got one that might prove drastic enough: the rule that you take turns.

Suppose I got two turns and then you got two turns. Would that foster the development of new strategies?

Do you have to take your turn? Could you pass? Would you ever find it strategically useful to pass?

What would happen if there were already some letters on the grid before the game started? The rule is that we start with an empty board. It is the rule that even if it's one we ordinarily take for granted. But suppose, even before the game began, there was an X in one corner and an O in the corner diagonally opposite? That'd be a real change, maybe.

Then there's the rule that we only use one kind of letter each. I mean, if I use X, I can't use Z too. Or maybe I could.

Maybe we could both use Z whenever we wanted to. Then we'd each have two letters to choose from. Sounds interesting, no? Maybe the Z could be a neutral letter, one that neither of us could use except to block someone? Or how about using the Z as a temporary block and saying that we could use that space for one of our letters only after a complete turn has passed?

What would happen if we could use each other's letters? That'd mean that either of us could win with an X or an O as long as that move completed a three in a row.

Actually, I've already tried that variation and it really makes for an interesting game. I play it just like tic-tac-toe, keeping all the other rules the same except for the one about whose marks are whose. I call this game "hypocrite." By giving it a name, I help officialize it. No, it's not tic-tac-toe we're playing, it's a much more sophisticated game called hypocrite.

How about the rule that you can't move a letter once it's been put down? Well, it's obvious that if we use paper and pencil to play the game and we allow each other to move letters around, we're going to wind up with a paper full of holes. After all, there are only so many times you can erase before you discover you're beginning to erase the table instead of what's left of the paper.

So who says that we have to play with paper and pencil? We could make a grid out of wood if we wanted to. We could make pieces. Then we could really get things moving.

And then we could make a larger grid. How about a star-shaped grid? And then we could change the idea of getting three in a row to getting all your pieces on a star point. And then we could change the name of the game to something really official sounding, like Chinese checkers.

OK, before we get much further into this, let's extrapolate. It seems that there are rules which guide how we can change rules. Some of these are merely pragmatic. Others are a bit closer to conventional.

General Definition of a Changed Game:

A variation which requires the development of a new strategy.

General Purpose for Changing a Game:

The one you're playing is no longer giving you enough of a challenge for you to feel you want to play it well. You can play it well, but you're losing interest. Your gaming mind is bored. You're not playing the way you want to be playing. Or, vice versa, you can't play it well, the chal-

lenge is too big, you playing mind is overwhelmed, the game is too hard. The general purpose for changing a game, therefore, is to restore equilibrium.

Specific Recommendation for Technique:

Change one rule at a time. Change the rule and see what happens to the rest of the game. See what other changes you have to make in order to restore the balance. If you try to change too many rules, and the game doesn't work, you won't be able to tell why.

Universal Definition of the Working Game:

What you are experiencing wellness in.

Another Specific Recommendation:

There are more rules than you realize. Many of them belong to a larger convention rather than a specific game. All of them can be changed. Some are subtle and take a long time to find. Cheat and see if anybody notices. Cheat openly so everyone can see it. If you think it's a rule but you're not sure, see what happens when you break it.

To Bear in Mind:

The reason you're changing the game. You're not changing the game for the sake of changing it. You're changing it for the sake of finding a game that works.

Once this freedom is established, once we have established why we want to change a game and how we go about it, a remarkable thing happens to us: We become the authorities.

No matter what game we create, no matter how well we are able to play it, it is our game, and we can change it when we need to. We don't

need permission or approval from anyone outside our community. We play our games as we see fit.

Which means that now we have at our disposal the means whereby we can always fit the game to the way we want to play.

This is an incredible freedom, a freedom that does more than any game can, a freedom with which we nurture the play community. The search for the Well-Played game is what holds the community together. But the freedom to change the game is what gives the community its power.

This is a freedom which only works well as long as we don't *have* to use it. We need to know that we can change the game when we need to. We also need to know when we need to change the game.

So, like everything else we've looked at in the pursuit of the Well-Played game, changing a game only works sometimes. It can work against us as well as for us. It can confuse as well as clarify, destroy as well as empower. Only if the intention to play well is clearly, undeniably established and shared, only as long as that holds true does the play community hold true.

Handicapping

Another thing that might stand between us and the Well-Played game is our refusal to acknowledge our differences.

The game that I play well may not be the same that you play well. Your experience of wellness might be different from mine. We can acknowledge and validate the Well-Played game as it is experienced by each of us. But when we wish to play well together, we must discover the game that works for all of us.

Even though I'm playing as hard as I can, I'm not playing well. Even though I'm as focused as I can be, you're playing with an ease and a sense of mastery that is unavailable to me at this time in this game. I don't know the game as well as you do. I am not as familiar with its subtleties. You find yourself playing well, but the game we are playing together is not a Well-Played game.

We can look for another game—one with which we're both equally familiar. We could change the game we're playing. We could find other people to play with.

But suppose this particular game is the one we both want to play. I am as fascinated by the potential I am discovering in myself for playing this game well as you are fascinated by the excellence that you are able to manifest through this game. Can we find a way to play it well together? Can we make it even somehow—the challenge, the sense of play, the opportunity to play well?

Of course we can. We've already done it. When we were playing Ping-Pong together and we discovered, eventually, that in order for us to play this game well together you had to play with the wrong hand. That was the first step.

You gave yourself a handicap. You changed your criterion for playing the game well so that we could find a way of playing it well together. You found a way to make the game as new to you as it was to me.

As we play any one game, and play it repeatedly, with different people, we become more and more familiar with how we are when we are playing well. As we become more familiar with how we are, we become clearer about the sense of wellness that we are able to experience and manifest in the game. We are able to extend that experience with the game until we have reached such a stage of mastery that, assuming we have found someone who has reached a similar mastery, we can play well consistently, from the beginning to the end of the game. We may not be as "good" as a professional, but we do, in fact, delight in the way we are able to play.

Suppose I can play checkers well. We play together and discover that I am able to play well more often than you are. We play a game together and I win. You have momentary flashes of insight. I have a steady light of understanding. I see combinations that you don't. Just when you're sure something is about to happen and you've prepared

yourself fully for it, I surprise you with something else. When the game ends, I have four pieces on the board and you have none.

What would happen if, next time we played together, I started the game with four fewer pieces?

I'd be a little less familiar with the game than I was before. I am less certain of the strategies that will work best under these conditions. I know that I won't be able to use the same opening. The game is newer to me. I won't be able to play it well the way I was able to play it well before. But it is now more likely that we will be able to play it well together.

Handicapping is used in order to equalize familiarity—to restore the balance between the different players' skills and understanding of the game. It is another evolution of the concept of fairness, stemming from a deeper understanding of the nature of the play community and its intention of playing well together.

Before we assumed a handicap, we were already playing fairly. We abided by the same set of rules. Neither of us cheated. But now the kind of fairness we are seeking is one that will assure both of us access to a Well-Played game.

Once we begin our exploration of handicapping, the possibilities for making the game work are again endless. If you play that well, and I don't, maybe you'd like to try it blindfolded? Maybe you can give me three free moves during the game? Or more if I need them? Maybe I can take a move back?

The convention of "no takebacks" has been helpful to us before. It has helped each of us become more familiar with the nature of the game. We have to deliberate more, to be more cautious. We have to be sure, before we make a move, that it is the move we really want to make. We have to plan ahead enough to see the implications of a move.

We have known, in our past experience of the game, too much sloppiness. Suppose, after you make your move, I deliberate for a while. It has opened up several possibilities, and I have to see which one is best.

I enjoy this experience of deliberation. Then, just before I make my move, you want to take yours back. Now I have to deliberate all over again. I don't enjoy deliberation that much! At first, I find this effort, though slightly unsatisfying, not too much of a distraction. After a while, however, I find that my ability to sense the game is suffering. I have to plan also for the next event in which you decide to take your move back. So I'm slowed down. My opportunity to play well is slowed down. And finally I say, "Look, from now on, once you take your finger off the piece, your turn is over, OK?" I say that to you calmly, openly. If I have to say it again, I will be significantly less calm.

Thus the convention of no takebacks becomes part of the way in which we perceive the game. It becomes a convention to which we always adhere. On the other hand, it might just happen that, because of the differences between us, that convention would stand in the way of our having the opportunity to play well together. Suppose that we could play better if we both had the opportunity to take moves back?

Yes, it's not like life. In life, it doesn't seem that one can take a move back very easily. But we're only playing. We aren't ready to make the game that lifelike. Later, maybe, when we're both more familiar with how we play well together, we can up the stakes to make the game more interesting.

Absolute mastery over a game usually results in loss of interest. When we become too familiar with a game, we tend to drop it; like tic-tac-toe, it becomes too predictable.

In handicapping one or some of us so that we can all play well together, we are not, in fact, negatively affecting anyone's experience of the Well-Played game. Even though you, master that you are, have accepted a handicap, you are still playing well. You might not be as familiar with the game as you were, but that is as it should be, because we're playing together, and the game, whatever form it takes, is a result of how we are able to combine. It has nothing to do with trying to find out which one of us plays better. The focus is on how we play well, together.

The purpose of a handicap is not to limit anyone's access to playing well but rather to restore the challenge to all players. When you accept a handicap, you aren't holding back anything—you're increasing your challenge, and addressing yourself to the challenge we have set before us as a play community.

When I'm playing with my children, I am aware how important it is to them that they have as much chance to win as I do. We all want the game to be fair. We all want to play as hard as we can so that we can experience playing well together.

Sometimes I wind up playing the game blindfolded, with my hands behind my back, while standing on one leg. Other times, I simply start off with a few checkers more.

We have found that it violates our mutual sense of fair play if I let them win. They know that I am playing poorly for their sake. Even though they enjoy winning, they get upset when they understand that I have held back. Even though it was for their sake that I wasn't playing as well as I could. Even though my intentions were parentally pure. The fact is that by letting them win I deprived us all of the opportunity to play well together.

Better that I handicap myself than handicap our opportunity to share a Well-Played game.

The Score

Still another thing that we can change so that we can keep our game going well is what we give each other points for.

I don't think it will come as a shock to you to discover that you can play any game with or without score. Sometimes, as we've already found out, the best way for us to play Ping-Pong is just to volley. We could, if we wanted to, keep track of how many times we hit the ball. That could be our score, if we wanted one.

Obviously we could play tennis the same way we played Ping-Pong.

Usually, however, what happens after we volley with someone is that one of us sooner or later says, "OK, let's play the game." Which

means: This volleying around was all well and good, but it was only a warm-up. Sure, the goal is to play well together. Sure, we can volley forever. But neither of us was playing very well. We were losing our focus—not really playing hard at all. So let's make it interesting again. Let's play for score.

Keeping track of the score doesn't make tennis into tennis. We can be playing without score. But part of tennis as we've come to understand it is in trying to make the other player miss. It increases the challenge because it makes us each try to be everywhere. You want to be as attentive, as present as I do. By trying to make each other miss we provide each other an invitation to awareness. We are saying, "Look, you want to be fully present, you want to be in a state of complete responsiveness and control, so see if you can get this one." Because that challenge is what we are asking from each other, because it helps each of us to experience playing well, it is right and good that I reward you with a point because you gave me a shot I couldn't return.

On the other hand, there are times when that kind of challenge is not what we need from each other in order to reach the Well-Played game together. There are times when the score becomes too important and we lose our focus on the game. There are times when we are giving each other points for things that are hurting our game.

Yes, when we're just volleying we're really playing a different game. It might be confusing to call it tennis. But, if what we intended to do was volley, if we found that Well-Played game by just volleying, then that's what we should be giving each other points for—keeping it going—even if we don't call the game tennis.

There's a tendency, as we begin to make things official, to think that only one particular form of a game is the real game. The fact is, any game we're playing is a real game. That's the fact. After all, the only thing that makes a game real is that there are people playing it.

But because we want to keep things clear, let's call tennis tennis and let's call our game something else. We can call it "volleytennis," "untennis," "cooperative tennis," "Chinese tennis"—we could even

call it "flurtch" or "gronker" or "smunk." You don't change a game by giving it a different name. You give a game a different name because you're playing it a different way.

It's really amazing how much a game changes, how different it becomes, when you change what you are scoring for.

Let's score each other for bravery. Whenever either of us clearly risks limb, if not life, in the attempt to return a shot, that player, whether or not she actually succeeds in returning the ball, gets a point.

Let's score each other for grace, flow, harmony, endurance, agility. Let's score ourselves.

It all comes down to this: What do we want to get points for?

And then we discover that we can get points for anything. Anything. And each time we choose to score for something else, we change the game.

So how about this: Maybe, since this is my first time playing, maybe I should get twice as many points for making the shot. Who says that everybody should get the same number of points for making it? Not me. I didn't say it.

The Drastic Change

And then, of course, there is the possibility that, though we can change the game infinitely, though we can constantly and continuously find ways we can make the game work, what we need to be doing is something else all together. That what we need to do, in fact, is forget the whole thing.