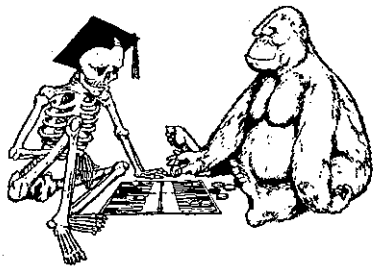
THE WORLD OF PLAY



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BEYOND THE RULES OF THE GAME: WHY ARE ROOIE RULES NICE?

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Abstract

Game rules and the rules of contexted gaming are contrasted. Observations of children's play are cited to illustrate the difficulties that arise when the boundaries between the two types of rules break down. It is proposed that an important source of "play" and "fun" in games derives from the apparent contradiction between "ideal" game rules and the "real" rules of gaming.

King: "I call Rooie Rules. Duckfeet."
Player: "Why Rooie Rules?"
King (after a brief pause): "Because Rooie Rules are nice."

Most studies of games focus on games themselves, on common threads of structure, procedure and rules across what may be very different gaming experiences for players. We have tended to work from the assumption that game rules define the activity we are studying and, further, that these same rules quite explicitly and prescriptively define the same activity for players (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971).

Recent analyses have suggested this overemphasis on game rules can lead to some rather paradoxical conclusions. Helen Schwartzman (1978), for example, has argued for abandoning game models in studies of play. While such a proposal may be well justified, given the limitations of traditional game models as they have been applied to play, Schwartzman goes on to propose we also take the play out of games. She justifies her position, in part, on the perception that "an understanding of game rules provides one with an understanding of the event" which rules out "the ambiguity, spontaneity and flexibility of play" (p. 327).

It is true that there is very little room in descriptions of game rules for much ambiguity or spontaneity, but it does not necessarily follow that games are not "playful." Being playful is an activity of people, not of rules. Understanding the rules, at least as we normally describe them, cannot be equated with understanding the event. We are reminded of Kenneth Goldstein's (1971) observation that

> the rules which are verbalized by informants and which are then presented by collectors in their papers and books for our analysis and study are an idealized set of rules—they are the rules by which people should play rather than the ones by which they do play. (p. 90)

Goldstein's suggestion that the "real" rules of the game differ markedly from those commonly reported by players (and by researchers) takes us beyond the rules of the game. It opens to question whether something is wrong with our commonsense notions about the nature and functioning of rules in games. Games themselves may be in some very real sense constituted by the sets of rules we have used to describe them, but the activity of gamers in constituting an instance of that game may require a very different descriptive and analytic framework. Gary Fine (1980) has used the term "gaming" to distinguish between the game itself and what real players do in constructing a particular instance of that game. In this paper we will explore, at least in a preliminary way, something of the differences between game rules and the rules of gaming. In the process we hope to put some "play" back into games.

Games and Gaming

For some time it has been the vogue to adopt games as metaphors for social interaction (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1961; Harré, 1974), but only

rarely have we approached games from a social communicational interactional perspective. Goldstein (1971) provides a notable exception, as does Gary Fine's (in press) recent analysis of fantasy role-play gaming. In both we find a good deal of "ambiguity, spontaneity and flexibility." Fine, for example, observes that

> In fantasy role-play gaming, rules and outcomes do not have the inevitability that they possess in most formal games, rather both features are negotiated and rules are adjusted by the referee and his group. Thus, ironically, fantasy games are in some ways more like "life" than like "games," despite their position as games. (p. 4)

It is not the particular game Fine studied that sets it off from "most formal games," but the type of analysis he has chosen. His game looks more like "life" than like "games" because he is not describing the game for us here, but the social and interactional activity of gaming. Looked at from a similar perspective, even professional sports, which we tend to regard as the most formal of "formal games," also display much more flexibility than might be suggested by their rules.

> To the NHL's thirteen referees, life is a constant struggle to maintain the game's flow, keep the coaches off their backs and the players off each other's. Most important, referees must have an instinct for which violations to call and which to ignore. They themselves talk of "good" penalties (flagrant violations such as tripping the player with the puck) and "bad" ones (minor offenses such as hooking a player who doesn't have the puck late in a tight game). "You could call a penalty a minute," says referee Ron Fournier. "But that's not what we're supposed to do. You call a guy for a minor infraction, and even though you cite the rule number, he just looks at you and says, 'What's that?' It doesn't earn you respect. (*Newsweek*, January 5, 1981)

This referee is well aware he is supposed to be providing something more than a literal reading of the rule book. Maintaining the game's "flow" and earning the respect of other participants depends upon knowledge of both game rules and gaming rules. One must not only know how the rule book defines and penalizes "hooking." One must also know that this "hook" is not the same as that "hook."

If we adopt, for the moment, Goldstein's distinction, we might distinguish between an "ideal" game rule, which refers to an action (a "hook") and to a game-prescribed outcome (a penalty), and a "real" rule, which refers to a "hook" as something other than a contextless action and to shared, socially-prescribed, negotiated outcomes (interruptions in game flow, loss of respect and such). The term "respect" makes reference to social relationships, to something of a very different order than game rules. It derives from the status of games as a social process, not from the status of the activity as a game.

When we encounter words like "respect," we move from an analysis of games into the realm of gaming. The quotation at the beginning of this

chapter (from the author's observations of a group of young Foursquare players) similarly moves us out of the game and into gaming: "Why Rooie Rules?" "Because Rooie Rules are nice." We will be exploring Rooie Rules as game rules and as "nice" rules. In the process, we will be asking whether it is possible to understand these rules without also understanding why they are "nice."

The World of Foursquare

For almost three years, children were observed playing the game of Foursquare on the lower school playground of a private Friends school in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. More recently extensive interviews were conducted with many of the players. The following is drawn from a larger research effort focused on the negotiational aspects of gaming, and especially on identifying some of the largely tacit understandings that allow these children to construct this kind of complex communal activity.

The groups of children observed come generally from white, middle to upper socio-economic groups. Less than a third come from Quaker families. The game of Foursquare tends to be dominated by girls, especially those in third to fifth grades, but boys have also been observed in the game, with and without girls. Older and younger children regularly join in. At the time of the observations cited below, the "regulars" consisted largely of third and fourth grade girls.

Children in this school have played Foursquare during recess for more than twenty years. The game is played on a square court painted on a portion of paved playground. The court is further divided into four equal squares, each of which constitutes the play space for one of the four active players. The player occupying one of the squares is called the "king." Before each round of play, the "king" calls a set of rules for that round (in our opening example, "I call Rooie Rules. Duckfeet."). This player then serves a large rubber ball to one of the other players. The ball is bounced among the players until it bounces more than once in a player's square, or until a player fails to hit it into the square of one of the other players. That player is out. He or she leaves the court and goes to the end of a line of players waiting to enter the game. The remaining players rotate toward the "king" square, filling in the vacated square, and the first player in line enters the game through the square farthest from the "king."

Foursquare is a simple ball-bouncing game. One of the ways it is made before each round of play. Such calls can be used for a wide variety of purposes, including increasing game excitement, adjusting the level of difficulty, and assisting or scapegoating other players. At one level the "king's" rules prescribe or prohibit certain actions and specify their consequences. In this sense they function as game rules. At another level, they may display or set the general tone for a particular round of play or for the overall gaming occasion.

It is this latter quality that allows the call of "Rooie Rules" in this game. A girl named Rooie was one of the regular players when the current observations were made. The king's call makes reference to her preferred set of rules, which include the following: "no holding" (the ball must be hit, not caught and thrown); "no slams" (bounces high over a player's head); "duckfeet" (being hit on the legs) is out (rather than a "takeover"); "spins" are allowed; and so on. Each of these individual game "rules" can be called by a "king." The call of "Rooie Rules" is a kind of shorthand, covering a long list of individual calls.

Despite the fact that play regularly proceeds after a call of "Rooie Rules," no player, including Rooie and the "king" who calls them, can supply a complete list of rules encompassed by this call. In fact, this call is very regularly used by very inexperienced players to avoid having to specify a particular list of rules before they have learned what calls are possible. What allows the game to proceed within such apparent ambiguity concerning the precise rules of the game is the tacit understanding that Rooie Rules are "nice," and "nice" is perhaps the paramount concern among these players. It is far more important to understand "nice" play than to understand the rules.

What Makes Rooie Rules "Nice"?

How are Rooie Rules "nice"? First, even though they are not explicitly mentioned and most of the players could not list all of them, Rooie Rules are understood to prohibit all kinds of what the kids call "rough stuff." This includes all moves like "slams" or "wings" (hard, low shots to the corner of a player's square) which are difficult for the receiving player to return. "Nice" players are supposed to give others a fair chance of returning the ball and, even more basic, they are not supposed to try to get other players out of the game deliberately.

Second, Rooie Rules are "nice" because they prohibit "rough stuff" in a "nice" way. Even when prohibited by a call such as Rooie Rules, players may still "slam" and "wing" and "hold" without being called out for doing so. When observations of this game began, this seeming lack of direct relationship between the rules as called and being "out" was particularly puzzling. Why bother to call the rules if no one was ever out for violating them?

Things became clearer one day when one of the players explained to another the rule really was "please don't hold the ball unless you really have to." This interpretation allows more experienced players to be "nice" to "little kids," who can do little more than catch and throw the ball. It also reflects a shared sense that it is unfair to penalize players, who, in the heat of play, lack sufficient control to avoid holding the ball briefly before returning it. Fairness, it seems, is an important component of "nice."

Later conversations with players confirmed that actions such as

"wings," "slams" and "holds" were not really prohibited by Rooie Rules though one should *try* not to do them. What was prohibited is what the kids call "purpose stuff." A common cited example of the latter is "holding" the ball while deciding which player to get out of the game. Perceived intentionality joins fairness as another component of "nice."

Third, Rooie Rules are "nice" because they avoid direct confrontations over player actions. Even the most blatant "purpose stuff" is rarely directly challenged. Certainly, no player would ever be called out for such violations. They may be simply ignored, especially when directed toward a player scapegoated by a dominant group of players. If not ignored, they will be handled in a less direct—and "nicer"— way. It is very common to observe rather elaborate performances—exaggerated leaning, grunts, cries of "whew!" and dramatic mopping of brows—around rather easy shots that just happen to land as a "slam" in the offending player's square. This latter observation underscores *perceived* intentionality as a major component of "nice" among these gamers. One is reminded of Goffman's (1959) concept of "demeanor." It is apparently less important here that one be "nice" than one make an appropriate display of being "nice."

Highly ritualized "yes you are"/"no I'm not" exchanges are very common. Again, from fieldnotes:

Angie: "Sally! You're playing rough!"

Sally: "So are you!"

Angie: "No I'm not! I'm being nice!"

Smiles, sideways glances, and the glints in players' eyes when they engage in such exchanges belie their seriousness. There is a quality of collusive "play" around ways of making deliberate actions look accidental, a shared delight in a virtuoso performance or a comment on a performance that just misses the mark.

It is only when "purpose stuff" does not have this playful, among-friends quality that one is likely to see sanctions applied for violations of the "rules." Players who consistently "slam" or "wing" without this playful collusion quite often find themselves on the receiving end of a wild shot they cannot return. Such occasions are always followed, of course, by profuse apologies from the hitter, who "just couldn't help it," and who puts on quite a performance to support a claim of innocence in the whole matter.

This use of indirect sanctions, or at least "accidental" sanctions, bypassing a simple appeal to the game rules, is also part of being "nice". If the "real" rules of this game tend to revolve around perceived intentions of the player (as in "purpose stuff"), then it becomes rather awkward to invoke those rules and still be "nice." Invoking a "rule" is not merely a statement of fact about a player's actions, but an accusation of having violated something of the social order, a much more serious charge. Among these gamers, invocation of such rules would involve not only explicit recognition that all players are not equal under the rules, but also

an implicit accusation of being purposefully vindictive or nasty—of not being "nice." It is not "nice" to violate "nice" rules, but it is also not "nice" to accuse someone directly of doing so. Instead, sanctions are imposed in a way which allows everyone to act as though they were accidental, accompanied by an appropriate "I couldn't help it" performance.

At least among the gamers observed here, the call of "Rooie Rules" invokes less a list of individual rules' calls than a general framework for player interaction. The latter rests upon shared standards for fairness, perceived intentionality and appropriate demeanor within the group. The term "nice," and its contrast "rough," are employed among this particular set of gamers to refer to a rather complex matrix of social rights and obligations. It appears that understanding and accepting these standards is even more critical to sustaining the game activity than understanding the set of rules currently in force. This became particularly clear one day when a group of boys joined the regular female players. The boys clearly understood the "real" rules of the game, as the "regulars" played it, but they actively challenged the implicit demand that they play "nice." In the process, what was usually implicit became more and more explicit. Their behavior triggered a rather active discourse concerning the "real" and "ideal" rules of this game. Some very interesting things began to happen.

When Players Won't Be "Nice"

As might be predicted among boys and girls of this age, the boys almost immediately drove the girls crazy by very overtly using "rough stuff" ("slams" and "wings") to get the girls out of the game. This does not mean the girls were not also using such moves. What enraged them was the boys' failure to disguise "purpose stuff" in the kinds of "I couldn't help it" performances demanded by "nice" play. The boys would, for example, call, "Rough square. Getting out on serves," and then slam the ball high over one of the girls' heads on the serve.

Totally outraged, the girls would counter, when one of their number was "king," with a call of "Rooie Rules." But, as we might expect, calling "nice" rules had little effect. The boys blatantly continued to "slam" and "wing" the ball past them. Since the girls were still bound by their "nice" rules, which prohibited direct confrontation over such actions, there was little they could do. As play proceeded, however, the girls gradually abandoned some of the trappings of "nice" play. They began handling violations quite differently. The following are excerpts from fieldnotes. We begin with three girls and one boy on the court.

Angie (the "king"): "Rooie Rules. Rooie Rules."

Angie pauses, looks around, and then walks over to the players waiting in line to get into the game.

Angie (to Rooie, who is waiting in line): "Rooie, tell them your rules."

As Angie returns to her square, she glares rather pointedly at Hoover, the boy who has just entered the game, while Rooie lists her rules.

(It should be noted that another understanding among these gamers is that players are only responsible for violating a rule they know about. Only if they know, and then violate, a rule can they be denied a takeover of the last round. This attempt to list very explicitly the rules in effect is highly unusual. It functions as a kind of warning to the offending players.)

A little later, Cindy (who is now the "king") calls: "Rooie Rules."

But Andy continues to "wing" and "slam" the ball consistently. After several such hits, Rooie, who is waiting in line, walks over to Andy's square.

Rooie (to Andy): "You're out! Wings are out!"

Cindy steps forward to back Rooie up.

Cindy (to Andy): "I called Roole Rules and there's no wings! You're out!

As Andy leaves the court he mumbles something about being a "fish."

The term "fish" refers to a scapegoated player. In over six months of observing this game, this was the first time the author had observed anyone being called out for "wings." The exchange above is a very significant departure from the usual patterns of play. Andy is well aware of this. He knows he's been had.

The girls' revenge was shortlived, however. In reacting to the boys' refusal to play "nice" by becoming more explicit in their calls of the rules, and by applying direct sanctions for violations, the girls began digging themselves into a rather deep hole. They expanded a call of "Rooie Rules," for example, to "Rooie rules. No slams. No wings. No rough stuff." They tried explicitly to prohibit each of the boys' offending actions. Naturally, the boys could always find actions the girls had not specifically prohibited. One particularly exasperated "king" recognized the problem when she tagged her call of the rules with, "And nothing you guys do!"

Of course, on the other side, the girls could not completely avoid violating their own rules, now differently defined. The boys were only too happy to point this out. Again, from fieldnotes, we start with four girls as active players on the court.

Angie ("the king"): "Fair square. Rooie Rules. Fair square."

(The call of "fair square" means no one should get anyone else out. It is a reference here to a desire to keep the girls in, and the boys out of the game.)

The boys waiting in line can be heard mumbling something about "holding."

In an unusual move, Angie stops the ball and turns to Sandy, a young and inexperienced player.

Angie: "No holding, Sandy."

She immediately puts the ball back into play.

More grumblings can be heard from the boys in line.

A little later in this round of play Andrea does a "double tap" before hitting the ball to the next player.

("Double taps" is a very common move, especially during a low pressure round like that framed by "fair square." It is a type of "fancy" move, in which the ball is tapped twice in the air before being hit to the next player.)

One of the boys in line immediately steps forward and shouts: "Holding!"

The other boys chime in, accusing Andrea and the other players of holding the ball, a move prohibited by Rooie Rules.

The girls on the court try to ignore the ruckus. They continue to play, as Angie (the "king") protests: "They can't help it!"

(The appeal here, of course, is to the "real" rule which makes reference to "purpose stuff," not to the act of "holding.")

The boys continue to complain. Angie finally turns to them and says: "Okay, then. I call 'holding'."

A little later Angie again calls: "Rooie Rules." But now she appends: "And there's holding."

Mike, one of the boys who at this time was playing regularly with the girls, shouts sarcastically: "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Andy (rather pointedly): "Did you call holds?"
Angie directs a withering glance at the boys, and starts the next round of play without comment.

The girls are trapped, and both they and the boys know it. The cornerstone of "Rooie Rules" is "no holding." The call of "Rooie Rules—and there's holding" is totally contradictory and unthinkable within the normal course of play. We have reached a point where the "ideal" logic of the game has been invoked, where rules have become rigidly pegged to player actions and game outcomes. In the process, the logic of the "real" rules has become paradoxical. The players have lost the leeway which allows the usual understanding that this "hold" is not the same as that "hold." The flow of the game, as these particular players constitute it, cannot survive such a rigid linking of rule and action.

Rules and Paradox

The kind of pickle the girls find themselves in looks suspiciously like the stuff of classical logical paradox (Bateson, 1972). They are left holding a bag very neatly labelled "no holding," and simultaneously tagged "this is holding" and "this is not holding." This is not normally paradoxical at all within the everyday logic of the game as these players constitute it, but it has become so in the confusion of action and rule. The philosophers might have helped them out by demonstrating that the problem is really one of propositions differing in order of abstraction, a simple error in logical typing. "Holding" and "nice" are not of the same logical order.

It's unlikely, of course, the players would find such as argument very persuasive or very relevant to their predicament, because they don't confuse the two in the normal course of events. All conversations with these children indicate a clear recognition of the difference between the way it's supposed to be in an ideal sense, and the way it is. The two are intricately and elaborately interwoven into a consistent and coherent framework which sustains the complex communal activity of Foursquare.

Some recognition that game rules and player actions, and the interpretive gaming scheme which binds them together, are of different orders may be more useful to us, as researchers, than to these players. In our thinking about games, we create our own paradox when we take the "play" out of games, the "fun" out of gaming, by treating a description of the game rules as descriptive of the activity or experience. Something of the same phenomenon seems to be at work, too, when we speak of games as frames, as though games frame activity, rather than gamers.

Games aren't much "fun" when rules, rather than relationships, dominate the activity, when there is no attention to "flow," "fairness," "respect" and "nice." We need the leeway to be playful in these relationships, to share and enjoy the performance that sneaks nastiness by as nice, that displays knowledge of the "ideal" rule and plays with the boundaries of the "real" rule. Taking the leeway out by treating all rules as rigidly prescriptive and tied to actions subordinates "fun," "flow," "spontaneous involvement" (Goffman, 1961) to the activity. In actual gaming, as Goldstein (1971) and Fine (in press) remind us, quite the opposite may be true.

Studies of this type suggest a number of assumptions about game rules that require active reconsideration. First, our thinking about rules in the games literature has been rather simplistic and monolithic. In other social science and philosophical traditions, the whole notion of a "rule" is considered to be highly problematic. Rules are assumed to be of many different types, multi-layered and hierarchical, referencing very different antecedents and outcomes. They are assumed to be subject to constant negotiation and reinterpretation in the course of everyday life. The current study, for example, suggests all rules are not equal and all players are not equal under the rules.

Second, because the activity is a game, we have tended to assume game rules are at all times explicit and foregrounded. We have taken for granted all debates and disputes concern the game, not the relationships among players. Observations of players, however, suggest the degree of rule explicitness may constantly shift, and such phenomena are highly contexted and indicative of social relationships among gamers (Erikson and Shultz, 1976; Shultz, 1976).

Finally, we might propose that the apparent paradoxes and transformations of "play" derive less from the logic of players than from the logic of our descriptions. Contradiction seems almost inevitable when we confuse the logic of the game and the logic of contexted gaming.

Epilogue

Just to close the story begun above, this particular gaming occasion broke down into one of the few complete stalemates observed over a period of several years. Whether a prohibited move had occurred or not simply could not be resolved by appeal. The girls refused to be "nice" and give an offending player, a boy, the benefit of the doubt, as they usually do, by allowing him a "takeover." Just before the bell ending the recess period, we find Angie turning to one of the boys and suggesting the only acceptable mode of resolution: "Okay, we'll give you guys another chance. But only if you promise to be nice."

Note

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