

## TALKING ABOUT WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR

The words "play" and "game" are used in connection with so many different experiences that we would never be able to arrive at any kind of mutual understanding of what this book is about if we didn't take some time to describe terms.

### Games

For me, the concept of games embraces those activities we know most clearly to be games—football, car's cradle, gin rummy, peek-a-boo. These are clearly games. Eating, making love, walking, reading, though they can be done playfully, though they can even be found as parts of some games, aren't, in themselves, games. I consider a game to be something that provides us with a common goal, the achievement of which has no bearing on anything that is outside the game. Winning at checkers does not make you a better lover.

I think of games as social fictions, performances which exist only as long as they are continuously created. They are like plays or songs or dances, belonging to some special sphere of human activity which clearly lies outside the normal reality of day-to-day living. They are not intended to replace reality but to suspend consequences. They are not life. They are, if anything, bigger than life.

At the same time, they *are* works of art, they do reflect reality. In the analysis of even the simplest game, like hide and seek, we can find

incredibly accurate metaphors for real-life experience: being *it*, running away from home, trying to get back again.

What connects games with reality is that they are lifelike. What separates them is that they are not for real. What unites them with the totality of experience is not just their metaphorical quality but the manner in which they are played.

## Play

Play is the enactment of anything that is not for real. Play is intended to be without consequence. Play is for fun.

We can play fight, and nobody gets hurt. We can play, in fact, with anything—ideas, emotions, challenges, principles. We can play with fear, getting as close as possible to sheer terror, without ever being really afraid. We can play with being other than we are—being famous, being mean, being a role, being a world.

When we are playing, we are *only* playing. We do not mean anything else by it.

## Playing Games

Even though we are involved in a game, we are not always playing. Sometimes we're negotiating, sometimes arguing, sometimes struggling—for real. Even though we are playing, we are not always involved in a game. Sometimes we have no goal at all, sometimes we are merely fascinated, sometimes silly, sometimes chaotic.

Playing a game is a special condition of both play and games. The game we are playing is the script as we have chosen to enact it.

## Well

The word "well" embraces the qualities of what we consider to be a state of health and excellence. Knowing that something is done well is an appreciation of the excellence of the deed as well as the excellence of

the doer. The fact that we use the word "well" also to indicate a state of excellent health—that we can feel well—only enhances the wholeness that this word describes.

## Playing Well

When we are playing well, we are at our best. We are fully engaged, totally present, and yet, at the same time, we are only playing.

## The Well-Played Game

is a game that becomes excellent because of the way it's being played.

If we are going to find a Well-Played game together, we are going to have to arrive at some common understanding of what it is we are looking for.

The most logical way to go about it is by playing together. Since we are playing together, we will have something in common. When we find the game that we can play well together, we'll all know what it is.

We'll also learn what it isn't. We'll be disappointed, sometimes. But if we are all disappointed together, then we'll also know that we are, at least, looking for the same thing.

But we're not even sure what games we should start off with. We're feeling reluctant. What if the game we pick is really disappointing? What if we never find the right game? How much disappointment can we take before we start getting disappointed in each other?

*So, let's go watch a game.* We can be more objective then. Then, if it never gets Well-Played, we can still talk about it without feeling that maybe it was our fault that the game was so bad.

*We go to watch a "professional" game. It's Us against Them. Since we're all for the same team, at least the score won't make us wind up hating each other.*

*Here we are, in the stadium. It's a beautiful day. And what a stadium! A veritable multimillion-dollar testimony to the value of the Well-Played game!*

*We really want to see a Well-Played game. So does everybody else. We want to see this game unfold. We want to see the accomplishment of excellence—not by any one individual, not even by any particular team, but by both teams, composed of people who are in such a state of physical and mental and spiritual well-being that they are making fantastic plays, unbelievable volleys, catches that leap up and amaze us, feats of grace and power... Really, that's what we all want to see.*

*At first, as we watch the game begin, we're excited. We have a premonition of excellence. It feels good witnessing this coordination of players, this professional ease as they take their positions.*

*As the game continues, we are indeed amazed. Something, some kind of excellence is already making itself felt. That was a good hit. Nice play for our team. Did you see the grace of that throw?*

*We're jumping up and down now, screaming for Us. Yes, that's the kind of excitement we're looking for.*

*After a while we seem to be jumping down more than we're jumping up. The score's 12-0 and it isn't even halftime yet. All right, yay and all that, our team is winning. But the other team....*

*They seem to be out of it altogether. They're not even competing. They're hardly in the ballpark, so to speak.*

*Should we stay, out of curiosity, at least? But the game is getting boring. Our team seems to be losing its spirit too. It's too easy for them. We might as well leave now and avoid the crowds.*

*So, what did we find out?*

*We did see some moments of excellence, some really good plays. These are the things that happen in a Well-Played game—like that throw, the spectacular catch, that run. When something exceptional happened, something unexpectedly right—like the player running between instead of around. And that amazing, mid-air turn she did when she caught it! Yes, that's part of what a Well-Played game is: doing things that are unexpectedly right. And the way our team anticipated that play—that was nice, that kind of presence is part of what a Well-Played game is.*

But this wasn't a Well-Played game, actually. The game itself wasn't Well-Played. We were disappointed, even though our team wiped the other team out. The other team disappointed us so much, they were in such poor shape, were playing so poorly. There was no challenge. No opportunity to make the whole game excellent. Even our team got bored and sloppy and stopped caring—though they won, though they accomplished what they were getting paid to accomplish, our team was bummed out.

This tells us more about what we consider a Well-Played game to be. Playing well has to be a general state. It can't be confined to any one team or any one player if we are to have a Well-Played game.

*How about a little game of Ping-Pong? Ping-Pong's my game, you know. Well, I'm not that good in it all the time, but I have played it well.*

*Should we volley first? Just so we can get used to the game again.*

*Yeah, I like the way it's beginning to feel, don't you?*

*Want to volley for serve? Well, I mean, as long as we're trying to figure out what a Well-Played game is, we might as well make a game out of this.*

*All right! Nice shot! I'm really surprised how well I'm playing today. Sorry, I thought it was my serve. Now it's starting to feel good. Good slam. How about that for a return?*

*Look at this. I'm playing faster than I can think. I didn't even catch myself deciding to hit the ball there, I just did it. I'm playing out of pure presence, almost—just happening to be there, exactly where I should be, just happening to hit back to you exactly where I should be, just happening to hit back to you exactly where I should be hitting. And look at you! Returning everything I try—even my fanciest, my shots I reserve for only the stiffest of competition.*

*Now do you know what a Well-Played game is? Sure, I won and all that, but even so, you have to admit it was Well-Played, it was what we were looking for.*

*Why are you looking at me that way?*

*Oh.*

*You were playing with your wrong hand.*

*How nice of you to consider my feelings, I think. You're right, I didn't know you were on the intergalactic team. It was only fair that you handicap yourself somehow. Made the game even, right?*

*So then it wasn't a Well-Played game after all, was it? No. Sure, I'm sure that, playing with your wrong hand and all, you were playing as best as you could.*

*I guess you're right. It was a Well-Played game. All right. All right. It fits the description. Yes, we shared excellence.*

*But my win! My win! You took away my win!*

*See, I thought I was really beating you. I mean, playing you at your best and still winning. I mean, I thought, because I was beating you, that I was better than I thought I was. Truth is, you were a lot better than I thought you were. Yes, I'm better than you when you're using the wrong hand. But what does that prove?*

*You could have told me that you were playing with your wrong hand before we started the game, you know. If you had told me then, then at least I wouldn't feel so stupid now.*

*Well, I guess, yes, it was in fact a Well-Played game. We both played well together.*

*Winning doesn't prove anything, does it? One of us had to win—we knew that as soon as we agreed to play for score.*

*Strange, though, the way I feel cheated. I know that it really doesn't matter who wins the game—at least that's the understanding that we have reached together—so why do I feel it was unfair of you not to let me know ahead of time that you were playing with the wrong hand?*

*What occurs to me now is that this search for a Well-Played game is already a radical departure from what we do, as adults, when we play games together.*

*Normally, the only common intention that we have been able to establish with each other is that we have each wanted to win. Though we have been playing games together, the only effort in which we are*

usually united, the only accomplishment that we have all been able to validate, is winning.

It is clear to me, now, that the result of such a union is separation, always separation. It divides us into winners and losers, those who have achieved and those who have failed. The division then leads us into further division. It becomes difficult, now that some of us have won and some of us have lost, to find a game that we are all willing to play well together. It was never our focus at all. Though what we have always cherished most is the game in which we are playing well together, winning takes precedence.

It is also clear that the old values are still too strong for me to play with. As contrary as they may be to the purpose we have evolved, their hold is too strong. I thought that I could prove something—to myself, to you—by winning. You understood what we had to do in order to find a Well-Played game, I didn't.

What we prove by playing well together is the fact that we can do it. We want to play well together.

It is a difficult thing to remember. Some of us, like me, get too easily confused.

Any victory, now that we know what it is that we want to create together, is shared. No matter who wins a game, if we have played well together, we have accomplished what we set out to do. That victory is not determined by who wins, nor by what game we play but rather by the *quality* of playing that we have been able to create together.

In other words, it's not the game that decides who among us plays well, nor is it winning the game that determines success.

Our success in the search for the Well-Played game can only be measured in terms of how well we have been able to play together. Either we achieve it together or we don't achieve it at all. It is not measured by the score, it is not measured by the game, it is measured by those of us who are playing it.

This is indeed a new thing for us. It is strange that it should be that new. It is strange that we would ever allow a game or a score to evaluate

how well we've been able to play together—strange that we have ever allowed our authority to reside in anything other than ourselves. It is strange that this notion of a Well-Played game can be something with which we are so deeply familiar, and yet something that we can so easily become confused about. How did it happen that I ever allowed myself to believe that winning the game was a more meaningful victory than my enjoyment of how we were playing together?

*How about another game of Ping-Pong?*

*Look, I've got an idea. Let's not play for score this time. Let's just volley. Maybe then we'll be able to see more clearly when we are playing well together. Maybe then we'll be less distracted.*

*No, I'm not saying that playing for score is bad or anything. I'm simply admitting that, based on our last experience, it isn't very helpful.*

*And I've got another idea. Since you're a better player than I am, suppose you play to my backhand more. I'm better with my backhand, see, and if it's all right with you, I think it'll help us get to a Well-Played game together. Maybe you should keep playing with your wrong hand, too.*

*Yeah, this feels good. It's becoming like a meditation, just volleying back and forth like this, just trying to keep the ball on the table.*

*The game has really changed, though, hasn't it? I mean, we're not trying to make each other miss anymore. When my shot hit the end of the table just then, and you missed it, I was disappointed more than anything else. I wanted us to be able to keep the ball in play, that's all.*

*You aren't getting bored, are you? I admit that I'm not giving you very much of a challenge. I mean, we're playing so gently with each other.*

*Whoops! I didn't expect that. It seemed that the ball had lost its equilibrium a little. I had to play back to get it on the table again. It felt good, though.*

*Yes, this is starting to feel right—like we're really playing together. Maybe if I played a little farther back... Well, I guess that was a little too far. From here, maybe. Yeah, that feels good.*

*Did you see that shot? I really didn't expect I'd be able to get it back on the table at all.*



*You can feel it too, can't you? Even though you're so much better at the game than I am, you can feel how we're beginning to play this game well between us, can't you?*

*Nice shot! I really didn't think we'd be able to save that one.*

*I said "we" didn't I? Yes, I'm beginning to feel how both of us are making this game happen. I mean, it was always true that we made the game happen together. I couldn't be playing Ping-Pong with you if you weren't playing with me. But now I can really feel how we're playing together.*

*Do you realize that we haven't dropped the ball for quite a while? We seem to be getting the feel of it. How long has it been? You're kidding! We've been doing this for an hour already? We've kept it going all that time?*

*This is amazing! I can feel the equilibrium shift and restore itself. I can't tell which one of us making it happen. But I feel so sensitive—I can sense the game, I can sense you, I can sense the way we're playing it together. And I love it. I love being this way. I love doing this thing, playing this game with you.*

*You feel it too, don't you? No, I don't need to ask. I can tell. I see it in your eyes, in the easy way you're holding your paddle. I can see you smile at the same thing. Whenever there's a moment of excellence, whenever one of us has to stretch beyond in order to keep the game going, we can both tell when it happens.*

*And each time it happens, that particular experience of excellence, it seems to happen a little more obviously. We seem to be getting better at playing well together. We can feel it now. We know what it is. It's no longer an idea, it's what we're actually doing with each other. And because we know what it is so intimately, we seem to be able to stay there longer.*

*Yes, we've found it. We are playing well together. The game itself has become Well-Played.*

## 2

### *GUIDELINES*

**W**e have accomplished much in a very short time:

- We have been able to arrive at a common understanding of what it is we are trying to do with each other.
- We have discovered that our most reliable source of information on the meaning of a Well-Played game is not in what we win or lose, or even in what games we play, but in the manner in which we are able to play them together.
- We have established criteria—critical points by which we can evaluate the games we play: Is this the kind of game we're looking for? Can we play this particular game well together? Is this kind of playing the kind of playing we're trying to make happen?

In so doing, we have come up with certain guidelines, certain methods that we can use to help us find what we are looking for.

#### **The Establishment of the Intention of Playing Well Together**

It took us quite some time and effort to decide that playing well together was in fact more important to us than what game we played or whether or not any one of us was able to win it.

We discovered that our agreement to look for a Well-Played game wasn't enough—that the intention of playing well together is some-

thing we have to be able to re-establish, constantly, whenever we feel it necessary.

So far, it doesn't seem that this intention is the sort of thing that can be established once and for all. Our needs shift. Our understanding changes. We get involved in part of a game and forget what it is we're trying to do with it.

## **The Willingness to Play**

When we finally found our Well-Played game, we were taken by surprise. We didn't expect it to happen the way it did.

The reason we found it at all was that we were willing to let it happen.

We were each willing to play. We were each willing to play that particular game. We were each willing to play with each other. We arrived at a Well-Played game because of the way we combined with the game. It isn't something that we made happen. It happened because we wanted it to happen and we were willing to do whatever we could to allow it to become.

On the other hand, it has already happened to us that, though we were willing to play and we had done what we could to establish the intention to play well, the game didn't work for us. If that failure had resulted in our losing our willingness to play, we would have never discovered a Well-Played game until that willingness was recovered.

## **Safety**

We need, in order to be willing to be willing, some guarantee, somewhere, that no matter what happens in our pursuit of the Well-Played game, we will not be risking more than we are prepared to risk. Even though I'm aware that I might die as a result of trying to climb this mountain with you, I can accept that as part of the game. On the other hand, when I discover that you're cutting my rope so that you can get to the top first, I find myself much less willing to play.

So, even though this willingness thing seems to be a prerequisite for our discovery of the Well-Played game, willingness, pure and simple, isn't enough.

We need to feel safe within the game we want to play well together.

## **Trust**

The safer we feel in the game we're playing, the more willing we are to play it.

But, for this experience of safety, we can't rely solely on the game. We must also be able to believe that we are safe with each other.

## **Familiarity**

In order to trust each other at all, we need to establish some basis of familiarity.

If we haven't played with each other before, we are not familiar enough to be sure of each other.

If we are playing a game that we are all familiar with, chances are that through playing the game together we will be able to establish some minimal basis of trust.

As we play with different people, we discover that there are variations of the games we have become familiar with. If we are familiar enough with our game, if we are really interested in sharing play with others, we can play the variation without losing the sense of safety that this familiarity provides. On the other hand, there are hundreds of games and tens of variations for each—more than we could ever hope to become truly familiar with.

## **Conventions**

If we can standardize certain aspects of all the games we play, we will extend our basis for familiarity.

Rules such as taking turns, playing fair, playing the game through to the end, good sportsmanship, are all conventions—derivations from different episodes of play, general rules which allow us to arrive at an ever broader standardization.

Violating a convention usually results in a stiffer penalty than violating any particular rule of a game.

By establishing the intention to play well together we have begun to create a new convention. We would like it to be understood that the search for the Well-Played game is what has brought us together. We would like to make this agreement clear enough between us so that we can assume it to be inviolable.