BERNARD DE KOVEN

THE WELL-PLAYED GAME

A PLAYER'S PHILOSOPHY

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Foreword

Eric Zimmerman

If we can't let go of our games, we can't hold on to each other.

Bernie De Koven is the closest thing we have to a shaman of play.

Not too long ago, I was privileged to take part in a New Games event led by Bernie. On a brisk afternoon in the Netherlands, a few dozen players stood outside in a circle. With the boundless panache of a practiced ringmaster and the eternal patience of a kindergarten teacher, Bernie taught us several games.

Bernie led by example, always reminding us that we could change the rules to suit the moment, or that we could exit the game whenever we wanted. Attuned to the spirit of the group, he flowed effortlessly from one game to another, tweaking a ruleset to make a game feel better, always somehow knowing exactly when it was time to move on.

He wove his spell. Or, rather, we wove it together. As we threw animal gestures across thin air, raced like hell with locked knees to capture enemies, and became a single blind organism with a forest of groping hands, Bernie helped us massage our play into a more beautiful shape. In a short space of time, jaded gamers, know-it-all developers, and standoffish academics became squealing, sweating, smiling purveyors of play.

This is amazing! I can feel the equilibrium shift and restore itself. I can't tell which one of us is making it happen. But I feel so sensitive—I can sense the game . . . 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.

Play Is for Players

Bernie De Koven has spent his life investigating the relationships between being playful and being human. And *The Well-Played Game* is a

masterwork—a skeleton key for unlocking your soul and letting the play flow in and out.

As books about games go, it does not fit the mold. *The Well-Played Game* is not a set of instructions for game creators, with tips and tricks about how to craft a more successful product. It's not a lesson book for educators, filled with strategies about how to teach better with games. And it's not written for nervous parents or cultural critics to make them feel better about playing.

So who is this book for? *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* is a book for *players*. It is about playing games well. And in the process of learning to play well, becoming a better person. Of course this book is also for game creators, for educators, for scholars, and for everyone else. Not just because we can all benefit from becoming better players, but because beneath Bernie's playful prose there is a treasure trove of earth-shattering, mind-blowing ideas about games.

The Well-Played Game was originally written in 1978—before the World Wide Web and mobile phones, before videogames came of age in 1980s arcades—hell, even before cable television. But nevertheless it is a book that seems more and more relevant to our increasingly game-ified and information-centric society. *The Well-Played Game* was perhaps the first book to bridge the design and play of games and look at them as deeply human phenomena. Its wisdom has much to teach those of us making, studying, teaching with, and playing games. It should be required reading for anyone taking play seriously.

If I'm playing well, I am, in fact, complete. I am without purpose because all my purposes are being fulfilled. I'm doing it. I'm making it. I'm succeeding. This is the reason for playing this game. This is the purpose of this game for me. The goals, the rules, everything I did in order to create the safety and permission I needed, were so that I could do this—so I could experience this excellence, this shared excellence of the well-played game.

Play vs. Game

Part of the wonder and insight of Bernie's book is how it frames and reframes essential questions of games and play. Among those of us that study games professionally, a division often arises between those that choose to focus on *games*—their elegant rules and challenging systems—and those that prefer

to emphasize *play*—the experiences of players and the communities they form.

This division between games and play is perhaps a natural outgrowth of such a radically interdisciplinary field finding its feet. But it is also a distinction that can be overemphasized. Battle lines have been drawn: on the one hand, social scientists and cultural activists that frame games as essentially user-generated play; and on the other, the game creators and structural humanists who define games as designed systems of rules.

The Well-Played Game is the missing, magical link between these two camps.

Now at first glance, *The Well-Played Game* seems to side solidly with the forces of play. Bernie introduces fundamental ideas such as the play community, elaborating on its formation and maintenance. He encourages players to change the given rules of a game as they see fit. And he seems to advocate the idea that any one particular game is merely an occasion for players to meet up and play well together. He certainly seems to be the patron saint of play.

And yet *The Well-Played Game* possesses a deep knowledge about how games work—a ludological expertise that rivals today's most ardent devotees of game rules. There are pages of prose on how formal and social rules subtly enable the structure of clues in a guessing game. There is an extended digression into the dozens of ways one might begin to alter the rules of tic-tac-toe. And there is a description of what it means to navigate the seas of chance in a single hand of poker that is so eloquent it brings me to tears every time I read it.

The truth is that Bernie sees both sides of this particular coin. For him there is no play vs. games—there is only the deep mystery of their paradoxical union. He writes, for example, about how the need for the laws of rules arises directly out of the engagement between a player and a community. He describes what he calls "the playing mind" and "the gaming mind" and recognizes both of them as necessary elements of playing well: the purposeful drive to win existing simultaneously with the purposelessness of playing for the sake of play. One without the other can't produce a well-played game.

The alchemy of Bernie's insights unifies what in other contexts seem like completely separate elements. And this is the tip of the iceberg of what

this book has to offer. *The Well-Played Game* is an essential handbook for game designers, game scholars and critics, game educators and activists, and game players of all stripes. It connects us to what is meaningful in games. And remarkably, it described our time decades before it arrived.

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.

The Future Is Playful

The Well-Played Game was a book far ahead of its time. It comes from an era before the tide of digital technology rose way above our heads to become the ocean of information in which we all now swim. Bernie wrote about tabletop games, folk games, and sports—well before videogames became a central force in mass culture. Yet *The Well-Played Game* addresses many of the particulars that define our ludic century—this current age of games and play.

User-generated content; games as art; independent games. These threads of thought, teased out of the substance of play thirty-five years ago by Bernie, have become in the last few decades part of the fabric of our time. Below are some of today's latest trends in the game world. In each case, Bernie's book has an almost eerily prescient relevance:

• **The rise of social gameplay** In the last ten years, digital games have finally shed their overemphasis on graphics in favor of multiplayer interaction. As videogames on smartphones and social networks become prevalent, they are returning to the ancient roots of games as interpersonal play. And *The Well-Played Game* is nothing if not a treatise on how human beings play together.

• **Independent and experimental games** Much of the indie game movement is about questioning the designed presumptions of mainstream commercial games. As a game hacker's guide, *The Well-Played Game* offers a plethora of strategies for how to deconstruct game designs in the pursuit of new forms of play.

• **Games as art** Are games art? Over the past decade, countless writers have weighed in on this question. Bernie was way ahead of all of us, offering his own nuanced answer: "I think of games as social fictions, performances,

like works of art, which exist only as long as they are continuously created. . . . At the same time, they *are* works of art, they do reflect reality" (xxiii).

• **The context of play** From videogame exhibitions at major art museums to DIY game venues like Babycastles and Come Out & Play, there is an increasing emphasis today not just on games themselves, but on where and how they are played. As a cookbook of meaningful play, *The Well-Played Game* contains endless recipes for engendering communities around games.

• **Game design as learning** The most interesting investigations of games and education today, ranging from the work of literacy scholar James Gee to the Quest to Learn schools, emphasize game design as a model for learning. *The Well-Played Game* has a clear goal of teaching players to become more like designers—to learn from the activity of modifying games in order to play better.

• **Understanding addiction** The rise of gamification and games designed to hook the minds and wallets of players has led to important debates on games and addiction. *The Well-Played Game* offers a unique and subtle angle on this subject. As Bernie writes, "I can't leave the game. I have to play until my point is won. And, as I've seen and said so many times, if I *have* to play, I'm not really playing."

• **Tournament games** eSports is a phenomenon with massive momentum today. *The Well-Played Game* takes deep competitive play quite seriously. Bernie investigates in detail the role of coaches, spectators, and halftimes in games, from tournament chess to professional athletics, and how they impact what it means to play games with excellence.

• **Open games** Today's notions of user-generated content and open source development point to the ways in which games increasingly blur the lines between players and developers. This "recent" idea—that players can turn the tables and become creators—is at the heart of Bernie's book. *The Well-Played Game* is a training manual for teaching you how to understand games as things meant to be bent, broken, and refashioned into something new.

Written nearly four decades ago, *The Well-Played Game* is a handbook for understanding games of our time. Bernie De Koven, our shaman of play, tapped into these streams very early, opening up avenues of thought that still feel fresh today. His approaches to games and play will continue to shape thinking for decades to come.

When we have this clarity, when it is always obvious to us what we are playing for, we can play for growth, wisdom, knowledge, truth, but always for the sake of playing.

The Antidote to Instrumentalization

A funny thing has happened to games recently. Videogames were villainized for decades as evil sources of violence and degradation. People who didn't know much about videogames—let alone play them—dismissed them as the most despicable kind of social ill. But in the last few years—quite curiously—we've seen the reverse phenomenon. Games are now hailed as the planet's silver bullet. Almost on a daily basis, games are trumpeted as the key to humanity's survival—they are going to fix education or curb obesity or eliminate pollution or poverty. I want to distance *The Well-Played Game* as far as possible from this kind of wishful thinking.

But why? What's wrong with the idea that games can solve the world's problems? Because the advocates for games curing the world too often instrumentalize games, and in so doing ultimately cheapen them. Their unspoken message is that games are only valuable if they have some concrete, measurable effect on society. What chef would say that cuisine is only valuable because of its nutrition? What about the taste, the smell, the presentation, the history, the culture, the dinner conversation? When we instrumentalize games in pursuit of something else, we bypass the beauty, the wonder, the *process* of play in blind pursuit of a rigid goal—as noble as that goal may be.

It might seem at first glance that *The Well-Played Game* shares this impulse to harness games for a higher purpose, to leverage games for a bigger cause. But in fact, this book you hold is actually an *antidote* to the instrumentalization of games. Bernie so often reminds us that *there is no higher purpose than play*. Like making music, creating images, or telling stories, engaging in play is what it means to be human. Games do not have to justify themselves by appealing to something outside themselves.

Bernie is not out to recruit followers to a social cause. He is not harnessing games for some great purpose. Rather than being levers for social change, games are contexts for personal growth. A place where we can get to know ourselves and each other better. And in this sense *The Well-Played Game* can help us to see how games are things of rare and great beauty.

When we play well together, we have made an embellishment, a useless, spontaneous, joyous human decoration on the shape of necessity—a piece of junk art, a beautiful graffito.

Lead On

Finally, among all of its other profound qualities, *The Well-Played Game* is a true delight of the written word.

Reading *The Well-Played Game* feels like a conversation with a friend—a particularly smart and playful friend who, like Bernie himself, never hits you over the head with his ideas. Instead, the book asks questions and suggests possible answers, winks and nudges its way through complex dilemmas, dances through stories and feelings and games themselves. It plays hard and plays fair.

As a book, *The Well-Played Game* is not a collection of facts. It is not a program to follow. It is not a list of formulas that are going to magically transform your game into a success or you into a happy person. It is instead a performance of playfulness, an example to follow, a personal notebook of one man's journey into play—that happens to be written with profound insight, generosity, and joy.

And this is why I call Bernie De Koven our shaman of play. Not a pundit or demagogue, not a scholar or historian, not an advocate or apologist. He is a Zen master of fun, a player that has learned to play well, a pied piper we spy dancing through the regimented streets of our town, inviting us to join him.

If we are lucky, we follow the impulse of our tapping toes. We step up and dance alongside. Skipping lightly to the tune on his flute, we dance on, encouraging others to join us, and our numbers grow. We burst past the city gates, into the great rolling fields of play beyond.

We continue onward, spurred by our own momentum. We're all dancing. Or making music. Or playing. Or not playing. Deeper, into the great unknown, where not even our pied piper knows what awaits. What do you think is just over that next hill?

Let's go find out. Race you!

New Preface

The 35 years that have passed since the initial publication of this book have brought with them a new universe for us to play in: the friends and neighbors with whom we work and play every day live down the street and across the globe; the things that entertain and inform us are interconnected; our toys talk to us and to each other. And yet, the games described in this book are just as much fun today as they were when I wrote about them. And given the opportunity and permission to play them, our differences are healed, our spirits ignited—just like they were for the people who played them before us. And understanding what makes them fun and how we keep them fun is just as valuable in understanding our lives in the shadows of Occupy Wall Street as it was in the light of the Human Be-In.

The Well-Played Game is about an experience that transcends games, just as the games you'll be reading about transcend the historical, geographic, social, and physical circumstances that divide us. It is not about any particular game, but about the spirit of play itself. Nor is it about any particular individual player, but about the relationship between players in pursuit of fun.

While *The Well-Played Game* was being written, we were still recovering from our "action" in Vietnam and the resignation of Nixon. We were for the most part disenfranchised from our government, but not our country. Some of us were seeking alternatives, others creating them.

We didn't have computers, but we had arcades where we found community and computer-mediated wonders and new worlds to master.

We had drugs, only then we thought they were a gateway to a spiritual community, serving as an ecumenical Eucharist with which we shared the brief but beautiful belief that all we really needed was love.

These were only some of the influences that led to this book.

Arcade games, simulation games, and, of course, the countless books and articles on the folklore and history of games all contributed to a renaissance in how we played and how we understood play.

A decade before I published *The Well-Played Game* I found myself working for the School District of Philadelphia. I was hired, ostensibly, to develop a curriculum in theater for children. That was, or should have been, miracle enough. The kind of theater I wanted to share with children and help them build would be their own kind—an improvisational theater they could produce for each other and create together and attend and celebrate together. And while I was busily engaged in teaching them my vision of children's theater, they were just as busily engaged in teaching me theirs: a form of theater that I came to understand as "the theater of games." Scripted, and yet improvisational. Handed down from generation to generation (a kid's generation being about two years), and yet constantly being changed: daytime rules, nighttime rules, playground rules, street rules, rules for when I have to bring my baby sister, rules for when my father is watching.

My curriculum, which I finally completed in 1971, was a compilation of some 1,000 children's games—actual games that actual children played.

The first real fruit of all this labor was that, for a brief time in the history of the School District of Philadelphia, children were playing in school—in classrooms and hallways and playgrounds—with the benevolent blessings of their teachers.

But that was just the first fruit. The harvest was yet to come. For I had learned that children's games are truly theater, and that, like all good theater, they captured the human condition, they revealed the human truth.

Even duck duck goose, with all the drama of getting chosen and of getting to choose, of making yourself visible or making yourself disappear, of trying not to be caught and trying to look like you're trying. Yes, that game, the kindergarten game where kids sit or stand in a circle except for the fox. The fox goes round the outside of the circle, tapping each kid on the head until, for reasons known only to the fox, one kid is chosen goose. The goose gets up and runs around the outside of the circle. The fox takes chase. If the goose makes it back to where she started from before the fox can tag her, the fox must choose another Goose. Sometimes you'd get chosen by the person you most hoped would choose you. Sometimes you wouldn't get chosen at all. Sometimes the chase took them through the circle, around

the whole playground. Sometimes the goose would run the wrong direction. Sometimes the fox took too long to make up his mind and a self-appointed goose would appear to save the game. That duck duck goose.

And then, the first time I taught teachers how to use the curriculum, the next great lesson appeared. Again, in the form of duck duck goose. It was the first of eight sample games I had selected to demonstrate the range of children's games. We only had forty-five minutes for the entire program, so I planned a maximum of four minutes per game. And forty minutes later, we were still playing duck duck goose. And the drama was revealed to be profound enough to catch the adult mind. And fun was being had. And I learned, again, how powerful a theater these games were, for adults as well as for children.

My next step was to create an environment in which I could help adults experience games as deeply and widely as I had come to experience them. I understood that if we wished to change the institutions that govern children's play, we needed to bring change to the adults who created those institutions. And that led to our building of the Games Preserve. It was a farm about sixty miles from Philadelphia with a 200-year-old stone house, a stone spring house, and a marvelously commodious bank barn (the kind of barn where you drive up a bank to reach the top floor), and ultimately twenty-five acres of fields and woods—fields big enough for capture the flag, and woods deep enough for hide-and-seek.

The barn became our indoor games theater. Because I was writing for *Games* magazine, the *Gifted Child Newsletter*, and *Simulation/Gaming/News,* I was able to fill the barn with puzzles and games from just about every game company in the world. My daughter, Shael, remembers this as a place where adults took kids seriously.

By 1976 we had groups visiting us from Philadelphia and environs, from out of state, and even out of country. And I was conducting explorations of play, games, fun, and everything related for couples, small groups, and large groups from schools, therapeutic environments, and even from a local prison. One consistent visitor was Dr. Brian Sutton-Smith (and his students) from the University of Pennsylvania where he was teaching courses on the folklore, anthropology, and psychology of play. He and I first knew of each other from my participation in an organization called The Association for the Study of Play—I became a lifetime member and he, a remarkable scholar of play, became my lifelong friend.

Then in 1976 and 1977, three pivotal events deeply changed the course of my work:

One: I met Bob Gregson, an artist in Hartford, Connecticut, who was producing a citywide event known as "Thursday Is a Work of Art"—a happening, of sorts, where he and his cohorts transformed sections of downtown Hartford with bits of creative silliness. You'd walk down an alley and be greeted by people sitting in folding chairs who applauded you, for no particular reason. You'd see a giant chair in the plaza in front of an insurance building where you could sit and instantly revert to a three-year-old. You'd pass a "joke exchange booth" where you could, as you might expect, exchange jokes with someone. You'd find yourself in front of a mural with space, paint and brushes waiting for your creative whim. It was my first experience with how you could transform a public space into a public stage where the actors and audience join together in the play to create some marvelously human comedy.

Two: I was invited to design an event for Philadelphia's 1976 Bicentennial celebration. The day after a visit from the Queen of England, we transformed the Philadelphia Parkway into a play environment that accommodated a quarter of a million people, inviting them to games of giant, four-way volleyball, giant pick-up-sticks, giant cardboard building blocks, giant, and block-long hopscotch. Between each block was another local band and alongside were places to eat and other places where you could learn more about local art and artists. So much play. So much fun. So many different people, of all ages, all walks of life, all backgrounds, playing together, celebrating our community.

And lastly: I met Burton Naiditch and John O'Connell, both from a San Francisco organization called the New Games Foundation. The Foundation was originally inspired by Stewart Brand, whose Whole Earth Catalogs helped alternative communities find the alternative tools they needed to build their dreams. Like Bob Gregson, the New Games organization facilitated and celebrated public play. There were uncanny similarities between my play/work and theirs, and they were about to take it to a new level. New Games became not just an event, but a movement. And they invited me to help them because I was the first one they met who not only understood the essence of their vision, but also how to expand it.

So I joined the New Games Foundation, became co-director along with John O'Connell and Burton Naiditch, helped with the first *New Games*

Book, was one of the main contributors to the New Games Training program, and was invited by the publishers of the *New Games* books to write what became this book.

Of the many new ideas and personalities in games that have appeared since this book was first published, there are two in particular that have made the idea of *The Well-Played Game* mainstream enough to merit the republication of this book: one psychological, the other technological.

A bit after this book was first published, I found a book called *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* written by someone named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It was the first book written by a psychologist who described something similar to the kind of experience I described in *The Well-Played Game*. I immediately adopted and adapted it as a core part of the presentations I gave while I was leading New Games trainings.

Later, Martin Seligman, as president of the American Psychological Association, coined the term "positive psychology"—a most useful distinction that led to the emergence of a small flood of books on the art and science of happiness.

These studies and reflections have, in some small but significant way, brought about an acceptance of that healthy, healing part of the human psyche that likes to enjoy itself—a part that had been deeply distrusted or ignored by psychologists and religious leaders until that time. And enjoyment is, of course, central to our understanding of games, play, and wellness.

The second change has been in technology. When *The Well-Played Game* was first published, there was no such thing as a personal computer. Today, almost all of us have at least one in our pocket or backpack or on our wrist. The ubiquity of computer-related technologies has resulted in the evolution of new ways to play and new kinds of games—to such a degree that when we describe something as a "social game" we are no longer talking about what goes on between kids in a playground but rather about systems of online interaction and communication. And when we talk about "street games" we don't mean the kinds of games that have been played on city streets ever since cities had streets; instead, we are describing games that involve a wide array of technologies in support of augmented social interaction in real time and real space.

I have been strongly affected by these changes. Three years after the initial publication of *The Well-Played Game*, I closed the doors of the Games Preserve and moved to Silicon Valley to contribute what I understood about

games and play to the evolution of computer games. I joined a company ingloriously called "Automated Simulations," and led the design effort for a series of small but innovative games called "Mind Toys." Because of other changes, not so much technological but cultural, the New Games Foundation was dissolved in 1983.

Since then, I've continued my explorations of games and play and fun, exploring different media and settings. The spirit of New Games and our understanding of how to share the experience of the well-played game continues to evolve and be embraced to this day, in many different technologies and philosophies, such as, in all likelihood, yours.

For one reason or another, because of your interest in the technology of games or the psychology of play, and perhaps because of both, you have found your way to this little book. I hope it will help do two things for you: 1) confirm your suspicions that, at their heart, games are all about fun, and 2) raise your appreciation not only for the elegance of a well-designed game but also for the ingenuity and resourcefulness of players. If successful, it will help you bring more fun to yourself, your work, and your community.

Original Preface: Invitation to the Game

Sometimes during a game, sometimes when a game is over, somebody uses the words "well-played" to describe something good about the game. The idea that there is such a thing as a well-played game represents a unique and profound synthesis. It is a combination of the concepts of play and game, yielding a larger concept—the experience and expression of excellence.

In inviting you into this book, I am offering you the opportunity to explore that synthesis. I have found that this exploration is helpful to those who

—want to find a game in which they can play well.

—are looking for others with whom they can play well.

—have discovered a relationship between the well-played game and the well-lived life.

This book can be read on any of those levels. It can be read professionally—as an athlete, a coach, a teacher, a therapist, a social worker, a recreation specialist, a game or play space designer. It can be read as a player, a parent, a friend, a member of a community. It can be read as one would read a philosophy.

We begin by exploring the idea. What, exactly, a well-played game is, is impossible to define. It depends on too many variables—on the game, the people playing, the place, the time. But we can talk about the experience itself, about the feeling, because, whatever the idea means, the experience of it is profoundly familiar.

Once we have been able to point to the same experience, we can consider how we arrive at it. The next part of our exploration is about what we do to share the experience of playing a game well—how we make it happen.

The central concept of this section is *the play community*, because it is through a community of players that the well-played game happens.

Once we find a well-played game, a game we can play well together, we want to know how we can keep it happening, how we can prolong it, how we can find it again another time, with another game, with different people. Here we will be considering such issues as cheating and fairness, keeping score, changing old games, making up new games.

As we find that we can play well together, we increase in our ability to accept the challenge. We look for new challenges.

Thus, in the last few chapters of this book we will be exploring weightier issues, like playing for keeps and winning. These are the things which, should we not be able to play well together, would lead to a breakdown and fragmentation of our community.

In the final chapter we toy with universal implications, as people are wont to do, usually with a beer in hand, after playing well together.

And, in what is called the "appendix," a minor burst of playfulness entitled "A Million Ways to Play Marbles, at Least."

Descriptions

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, cat'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, like works of art, 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 without being seen.

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. 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 excellence and health. 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.

1 Searching for the Well-Played Game

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 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 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 step pretty far 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 is 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

We 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 that 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 something 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, part of the challenge. 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 even 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.

3 The Play Community

By empowering each other to create new conventions, by establishing guidelines, we assure each other of a common intention and mutual respect for the willingness to play, for the need for safety and trust. We need to recognize that these guidelines are fragile and fictitious, despite all the legislation we went through to be certain they were mutually held. The only real assurance we have lies within the community of people with whom we are playing.

The need for this kind of community holds true whether we are players or spectators. As a spectator, I want to be able to scream for my team. If the spectator sitting next to me wants to scream for her team, and if she insists that I also scream for her team, the likelihood is that we will wind up screaming at each other. We have to spend more of our time resisting each other than enjoying the game. I want the game to be important. She wants the game to be important. But we both lose our opportunity to relish this importance when the game becomes more important to us than we are to each other.

When mother and child play together, regardless of what they are playing, they are establishing a play community in which both people operate under the convention that they take precedence over the game. When the child cries, the mother stops playing.

When children play together, in the street or the back lot, they too establish a play community. When someone gets hurt, the game stops. When there's a little kid around, you watch out for him, you play softer when you're near him, you give the kid a break. At all times there is an acceptance of a shared responsibility for the safety of those with whom you play.

Though this is a difficult thing to maintain, I can't believe that it is any more difficult than maintaining any other convention. The point is that

somehow, in the process of becoming adult, in the attempt to establish familiarity, we tend to separate the game from the play community. We develop an official body of rules so that, even though we might not be familiar with the people we're playing with, we'll all be familiar with the game. Baseball is always baseball, no matter with whom we are playing. In the enlargement of our community to embrace the national community we abandon some of the conventions that provide us with access to play. Our goal becomes not a well-played game but a game that we or our team can win.

What's so strange about this whole shift is that the search for the well-played game never stops. What stops is our awareness of how to find it—our awareness that in fact it resides not only in the game but also in the people playing.

The conventions that we tend to enforce with each other are those which are more directly related to the maintenance of a particular game than they are to the establishment of a community. Winning takes precedence over establishing trust. Winning takes precedence over providing for the safety of the players. Winning even takes precedence over the willingness to play.

The play community becomes a game community, devoted to the pursuit of a particular game, measured in terms of our success or failure as players of that game.

Thus, we meet for the sake of the game. We go bowling or play bridge. We enter leagues and evaluate our community in terms of how successful it is in prevailing over others. As a game community, we have abandoned any authority to determine whether or not the game we are playing is, in fact, the game we can play well together. That decision depends on who wins.

The nature of a play community is such that it embraces the players more than it directs us toward any particular game. Thus, it matters less to us what game we are playing, and more to us that we are willing to play together.

In fact, as our play community develops, there are particular times when we seek out games with fewer and fewer rules. We have so affirmed our ability to play well together, to be safe with each other, that rules begin to get in the way of our freedom together.

As we begin to sense our power to create our own conventions, as we discover that the authority for determining whether or not a particular game is

suitable resides not in the game but in the play community, we are willing, even, to change the very conventions that unite us.

Because we have played well together, because we have played so many different kinds of games together, we have become familiar enough with each other to allow our trust to reside not in any particular agreement but in the community itself.

We can explore other conventions. We can make it our goal to have fun. Only fun. Just fun. We can abandon even the agreement to pursue the well-played game together. The trust we have established with each other is so profound that we need no longer to aim at anything.

And so we continue, pursuing this convention of having fun together, until any attempt to decide ahead of time what game we're going to play, even an attempt to decide what rules we are going to play by, becomes too much of a hassle—unnecessary, in fact contrary to our purpose, in fact impossible.

And then, maybe, we find ourselves playing follow the leader into the woods, or we find ourselves climbing trees and skipping rocks. And when everybody's running amuck so beautifully, so caringly, who's going to ask for rules?

We are having fun. We are caring. We are safe with each other. This is what we want. We are playing well together, even though we can't name what game we're playing. We are having a good time. We trust each other. There's no doubt at all about our willingness to play. So there's nothing, anymore, that needs to be established. We are who we want to be, how we want to be, where, here, now.

And then, suddenly, we find that we have done this enough. We aren't tired of having fun. We're tired of having fun this way. We aren't tired of each other. We want to change the way we're playing together. Maybe we want to do something harder. Maybe we need some challenge.

Nobody knows how this happened—this change—but somehow all this delicious ease we have with each other has become too easy, too familiar. Now we want to have fun *doing* something—have fun doing something else, maybe. Have fun working even. Building. Gardening. Making a meal. Eating.

Until even having fun isn't enough and we establish other aesthetics. We want to feel beautiful together, to experience grace together, to express harmony.

Until that too isn't enough, and all that we want to do is find another game.

But, whatever game it is that we finally find together, whatever game we are able to play well together, we are somehow assured, even then, that we will be safe in it.

Let us hypothesize that all we are trying to do at this moment is to have a good time. We're not looking to prove anything to anyone. We simply want to play something together that will be good for all of us.

I feel like playing a game of checkers. I'm tired of running around. I want to do something mostly in my mind, and I'd like to be doing it with you.

You, on the other hand, want to swing from the tree rope. You don't want to get into anything competitive. You aren't particularly interested in thinking at all. And somebody else wants to play tug-of-war.

Now the fact is that, if we really wanted to play together, we could find a game if we needed one. That, also, is most amazing. Somewhere there's a game we could all play, each of us feeling the way he's feeling, each doing what he wants to be doing. We might have to give up the things we're using. We might have to change a few rules. We might even have to make up a whole new game. Maybe we'd wind up with our tug-of-war friend holding on to a rope that you were swinging on while I counted the swings. Maybe a card game. Who knows?

When we're looking for a well-played game, we're not as concerned with the game we wind up playing as we are with having the opportunity to play it well together.

When we look often enough, with enough people, in enough different play communities, we find eventually that it really doesn't even matter whether we're being physical or mental, competitive or cooperative. Those are just games.

We'll even find that the kind of activities we get involved in don't matter that much. You might be tired, you might be feeling thoughtful, but you also might really delight in a heavy game of soccer. Because your basis for trust and safety has broadened to such an extent that it resides not in any particular game and not even in any particular play community, you're willing to play anything. Even if you start off feeling tired or lonely or bored. It doesn't matter, because you're willing to play, and you know that any game will do, that any game will get you there. You know that because you know the energy resides not in the game but in playing with people.

So it comes back to your basic willingness. But now it seems that willingness generates more willingness—that what at first we weren't willing to do we find ourselves seeking out. We become willing to do something that we didn't even feel like doing. We even suspend judgment about whether or not we'll like doing something until the time that we find ourselves doing it. We even suspend our fear and prejudice about the people we're playing with. And all this started when we began looking for a game we could play well together. All this evolved when we realized that the people we are playing with are as important as the game we are playing with them—easily as important.

We have already begun our play community. We have played with each other, the two of us, and have found a way of playing well together. We have established the intention. By now we feel safe with each other—at least while we're volleying.

We are not yet willing to play *anything*. We have not as yet established a familiarity with each other deep enough to transcend the game we have found. We have found our union within a game, and we are not yet willing to risk it.

We've played well. We just haven't played enough.

4 Keeping It Going

We have established a common intention, and, in so doing, we have begun to evolve into a play community. We know what a well-played game is and have established guarantees of the willingness to look for it and the safety of the search. We have begun to become more familiar.

Now, it happens that we have found one game in particular which we both seem to be enjoying. It became our objective, once we found the game, to keep it going as long as possible. We wanted to volley forever.

Just volleying wasn't enough. The moments of the game which we both perceived to be well-played were the ones that really kept us going. Trying to volley for as long as possible was merely the goal of the game. It provided us with a focus. It allowed us to maintain our connection when that focus was transcended by our delight in the way we were able to play together.

As we became more familiar with those moments in which the goal of the game, though still present, was enlarged by virtue of the way in which we pursued it, we arrived at a common understanding of how we could play this particular game well.

This understanding, as it became shared and familiar, allowed us to sense, a bit more clearly each time, when we were about to transcend the game. Thus, we got better at playing well together. Thus, we got better.

We are ready to try a different game. Discovering how we play that game well will allow us to arrive at a slightly larger understanding of how we play well together, as people who happen to be playing a game, as people who happen to be happening together.

Let's try something very different—a thinking game, a game in which we are more involved in the art of reasoning than we are in the act of physical skill.

Suppose, for example, that we're playing Mastermind.[1] I've set down my secret arrangement of colors and you're trying to guess. In this particular game no verbal communication is necessary. You guess by placing a combination of colored pegs in the first rank. I respond with other pegs, letting you know, through this rather bizarre form of response, how many of your colors are the same as mine and how many of those colors are in the same position as mine.

As a matter of fact, the ease or difficulty that you are having in solving the puzzle I've posed has little to do with my skill as a problem-poser. The particular combination of colors I arrived at is largely arbitrary. I might have found an unusual combination, and, in that case, I did employ a modicum of skill. However, as we get into the game, it becomes evident that the difficulties you are having in guessing my combination are not as much due to the brilliance of my modicum as they are the result of poor luck on your part or of your being caught in some kind of logical pattern that you can't think your way out of.

We have chosen this game because we suspect we can play it well together. We find ourselves in two different roles. We take turns posing and solving problems. Though I am posing the problem, you are, actually, alone in your attempt to solve it. How, if we are so divided, will we be able to arrive at a well-played game together?

The Art of Giving Hints

Now, because I made the combination and I'm responsible for the accuracy of the clues I've given you (if any of my responses are wrong, it really ruins the game, and, according to official rules, it counts as my loss—though, in fact, the loss is mutual), I tend to feel some ownership of your difficulties. You are playing as well as you can, but I am not playing at all, and I'm feeling uncomfortable, and the game doesn't seem to be something that we are playing well together.

So I'd like to give you a hint of some sort, to help you play well and to allow me to be more a part of the game.

For you to accept my hint without feeling that I'm somehow rubbing it in that you can't solve the problem by yourself, I have to know that you'll receive the hint as I intended it—a way to make the game well-played, a way to keep it going.

I'm not having fun seeing you struggle. I feel that in some way it is my responsibility. After all, I did pose the problem in the first place.

So I want to help. I want to keep the game going well, and, if I don't do something soon, it's going to stop. I can see that you're beginning to get frustrated, that, though you've completely accepted the challenge of the game, it's beginning to overwhelm you. You seem to be getting more involved in trying to end the game than you are in playing it. I would like to keep the game going. I would like to make your access to play more readily available to you.

In order to do this, I also have to make clear to you that my offer of help is not a strategy. I have to establish the fact that my hint is coming from outside my desire for personal gain in the game itself—that I'm offering the hint in the attempt to make the game more enjoyable for both of us. In experiencing your struggles, I'm experiencing my own discomfort with my role. I want to make sure that nothing is interfering with our opportunity to play this game well together—not even the game.

This is a very delicate moment. Too often in our past experiences we've had offers of help that really weren't meant to be in our best interest. Needing help, in fact, according to another convention, is an admission of failure. According to the convention of most games, we are not supposed to help each other win. If you're helped into victory by someone else, it just doesn't count as much.

But, because we are operating from a different convention—that of the play community—it is more important that we be able to establish yet another convention in which we can offer and ask for help, if it will make the game more accessible for our playing it well together.

Before I give you any hint, I ask you if you want one. I try to make clear that it is your option. This way, my hope is that I can get some guarantee from you that my understanding of what it will take to keep the game going is in consonance with yours. We still aren't that familiar with each other, and I figure that if I give you the option of accepting or rejecting my offer, my intention will be better understood.

There is still the chance that you might take my asking you whether or not you want a hint as, in itself, a game strategy—as my somehow trying to make you feel worse for your difficulties. So, I also have to consider how my offer will be interpreted—and all this consideration has to be gone through before I even say anything to you!

It might have been easier if, before we had started that round of play, we had made some sort of hint-seeking rule. If we had established that anyone could ask for a hint at any time, and that the request would in no way influence the scoring procedure, then, perhaps, the hints would be easier to give and to receive. We could have made some sort of official-sounding rule, such as "If, by the fifth guess, the problem-solver has not yet scored one black peg, that problem-solver, by tapping twice with the left index finger upon any colored peg, may indicate to the problem-poser the need for a hint. Only six hints will be allowed."

For us to establish the fairness of such a rule, we would have had to test it out through play. We could not merely say that the rule would work until we saw that it would work to our mutual advantage, that it would indeed provide us clearer access to a well-played game. We would have had to take advantage of that rule several times and experience its effect on the way we're able to play together before we could accept it as a good rule. In other words, maintaining the game, like maintaining the play community, requires an ongoing reaffirmation of the intention of playing well together.

Assuming that the hint rule has been established, we now have to consider the difference between a good hint and a bad hint. It isn't enough for us to allow for hints; we must also establish some criteria for evaluating their effectiveness in our pursuit of the well-played game.

There are at least two kinds of bad hints: those that don't give enough information (because they are somehow not really pertinent to the problem the other player is perceiving), and those that give too much information (because, instead of helping one to arrive at a solution more effectively, they give the solution away).

There are probably more kinds of bad hints. However, there is really only one kind of good hint—and that is the one that in no way interferes with the opportunity for accomplishment—one that helps the other player exactly as much as that player wants to be helped.

Thus, hint-giving is an art in itself. In order to be effective, it requires a leap into the other person's mind. To give you a good hint, I have to be empathic enough to know what kind of problem you're really having and what kind of help you're really seeking.

Children have a terrible time when they try to give hints to adults. What appears to the child as a devilishly subtle clue more often than not becomes

for the adult a dead giveaway. In order to give a good hint, we must be able to understand how the other person is thinking.

No matter who's giving a hint to whom, a hint that gives away too much information spoils the game. It takes away too much from the other player. The puzzle can no longer be solved because the solution, as a result of the hint, is already obvious. I feel bad when I'm deprived of the opportunity to solve a puzzle on my own terms. Once I've accepted a challenge, I feel cheated if someone takes it away from me.

All of which is to be taken as a case in point of the need for empathy and the difficulty of achieving it. Because of this difficulty, hint-giving becomes an exploration of interpersonal communication. For it to be effective, we have to understand each other enough to be certain that the help we are offering is exactly the help that can be best used.

In this case, playing Mastermind with a hint rule can provide us with a way of learning how we can help each other play well. This is a very significant achievement in the development of any community, whether its purpose is play or learning or working. Imagine the power available to a group of people who know how to help each other think!

There are other times when hint-giving is so appropriate that it tends to be all but taken for granted.

For example, suppose on your seventh guess you repeat your first guess exactly. Such an oversight is a wasted move. Clearly no new information will be available to you as a result. And I would certainly not wish to gain from something as dumb as that. Obviously you weren't playing well.

I want to play you when you're at your best. That desire does not come out of any elevated state of being. It is not a manifestation of my wonderfulness. It is simply one of the conditions I require for my experiencing a well-played game. This was the problem I was having with you when we were playing Ping-Pong a couple of chapters ago.

In fact, since our purpose is to share a well-played game together, I would tend to lose as much as you would. We would both lose that sense of excellence we are hoping to create together.

So I feel no qualms at all about pointing out your oversight to you. It's a favor to both of us. In fact, you receive it easily in the manner in which it was intended. You realize that it doesn't give anything or take anything away. It just brings you back to the game so that you can play better and provide me with a more meaningful challenge.

On the other hand, in some cases, such an obviously legitimate hint could be taken or given in the wrong spirit. It could make one of us feel stupid. It could be given in such a way as to bring shame with it.

The rightness of hint-giving is not defined by the rules we are playing by, but rather by the relationship that exists between us as persons.

The Well-Played Guessing Game

Every guessing game is a variation of the infamous "I know something you don't know" game.

The idea behind all guessing games is that one player has access to information that the other player hasn't and is trying to achieve. This is one of your basic life situations—a reflection of the reality in which we need to learn from each other.

How the second player gets that information is what makes one guessing game different from another. This simply means that the kinds of clues that are permissible determine the kind of guessing game we are playing.

For example, there's the game of twenty questions. In this game there are (1) a limit on what kind of answers can be given (yes and no only), (2) a limit on how many questions can be asked (as is so clearly defined by the very name of the game), and (3) a categorical clue that is offered freely at the beginning of the game (animal, vegetable, mineral; person, place, thing).

It is difficult to tell who wins and who loses this kind of game. If the guesser cannot guess the animal or object, it seems that the guesser has lost. But, if the clue-giver has not given the appropriate kinds of clues, has answered incorrectly, then the game itself is nullified. It simply doesn't count. And, often, it results in the guesser feeling cheated or angry. Thus, there is on some level a sharing of responsibility for making the game work.

If the guesser answers after, say, three guesses, there is as much a feeling of mutual loss as there would be if the clue-giver gave the wrong clue. The guesser wants something that is hard enough to be interesting to try to guess, and simple enough to be eventually achieved. Thus, it would be unfair in some games if the object were something too obscure, like a rutabaga, or too obvious, like a carrot. This depends on who's playing with whom.

Thus, the well-played guessing game takes into account the players' knowledge of each other as much as it takes into account their knowledge of the world.

If our goal is to play well together, we not only have to find the game that lets us do this but we also have to find the right way to help each other play.

Fairness

We want to keep the game going. Unfortunately, we can't always count on being able to help each other. There are times, no matter how clearly we understand each other, in which one of us is too involved to be able to offer or receive help.

In guessing games, the one of us who knows the answer can afford to be more sensitive to the other player's needs. But, in a game like checkers, even though we have some time between turns, we both tend to get too involved in planning and strategizing to be fully aware of what kind of help we need from each other.

And, if you think that kind of exercise of compassion is difficult in a game of checkers, try it during your next tennis match!

We want to get involved. We also know that we can get too involved. So we have to make other rules and conventions which, in the heat of the game, will help us maintain our intention of playing well, together.

The convention of fairness is one of our earliest attempts. The convention of fairness, when contrasted with the idea of survival of the fittest, is obviously a game-oriented concept. Only much later will it evolve into a more comprehensive idea such as justice.

Fairness, when discussed by children in a family or neighborhood, is not the same as justice. It means that if two children have to share a piece of three-layered cake, even though one child hasn't eaten for days and the other just ate two of the three layers all by herself, what's fair is that each child gets half of the remaining layer. That way, it's fair.

On the other hand, when the concept of fairness is spoken of in relation to playing games, it is used more as an emergency measure—a semimagical word which, when evoked, gives the utterer the chance to win, too. Young children perceive a game as fair only as long as they perceive themselves able to get whatever prize it is that the game or anybody else offers.

Young children don't really understand the idea of winning and losing. It is another convention which, though introduced quite early into the children's play communities, acts more as a divisive than a unifying force. To a young child, a game is a source of fascination. If there is such a thing as winning, and winning is to be considered such a wonderful experience, then, whoever is playing should win.

They're not ready, in terms of their understanding of community, to acknowledge the fact that nobody can win if nobody loses. Or, even if they're able to admit that one of them has to lose in order to allow everybody else to win, it would be quite contrary to anyone's desire for true fairness to volunteer to be the loser.

Later on, making a game fair will mean making sure that everyone has the same *chance* to win. We learn that the only thing we can reasonably guarantee each other is that we will all be playing by the same rules, and that all of us will have the same opportunity to win. It is this concept which allows us to develop a functioning play community.

It is an extremely trying task to create a system of conventions which will guarantee each member of our play community equal access to play. We need, at times, to employ an entire host of officials to help us keep that guarantee. As difficult as it is, it is a profoundly significant act in that it is one of the first and most deeply felt of encounters between individual and community play consciousnesses.

But for young children, if it is the rule of the game that only one child gets to be first, the game is considered fair only by the child who becomes first.

Cheating

Along with the idea of fairness comes its necessary complement: cheating.

Cheating is what someone does to give him/herself a more than even chance to win. At least, that's what we most often call cheating.

When I happen to notice you attempting to draw universal attention to my little cheat, I am aware that the motivation for your sudden intensity stems not as much from your concern that I have broken a rule as from your feeling that I have somehow deprived you of your opportunity to win. You are still not speaking from or referring to the idea of the play community, because, at that time in your development, the only really well-played game is the one you win.

It is obvious that your concern with my cheating is biased in your behalf. If I'm doing something wrong, even if I'm in flagrant violation of the rules of the game, as long as you perceive yourself as winning, everything's cool.

At this stage, even asking for a hint could be considered cheating. The only thing that would ever make you willing to give me a hint would be some assurance on my part that my request for help was a giving up—that if I win as a result of your hint, I haven't really won.

You might allow me to cheat a little bit, if it makes things a little closer to being even—as long as you're still ahead. It's cheating, but it's not so bad then. It helps keep the game going.

The things we do that are close to but not quite cheating are usually done not so much for the sake of keeping the game fair as they are done so that we can keep the game going.

A case in point:

I was playing musical chairs with a group of children ranging in age from seven through eleven. These children had by this time been able to establish some of the groundwork for their play community.

I already had enough sense of how they played to recognize that the game would be more fun for more children if everyone could continue playing. In other words, I changed the rules so that no one would be out of the game unless he or she really wanted to be.

I simply refrained from removing any of the chairs. I made certain that there was one more child than there were chairs. Whenever the music stopped, therefore, there would be one child who didn't have a chair who could avail him or herself of that prized experience of being unseated. And then we'd play the next round. I didn't see the need for keeping anyone out of the game, and neither, so it seemed, did anyone else. There was always someone who kind of lost, and there was everyone else who kind of won. But there was never anyone who had to stay lost. It was enough fun as it was.

We had been playing the game for about ten minutes. The game had been going well, but it seemed to have reached its peak. After all, fun's fun. I had decided that I would suggest a new game after the next round was over.

However, when the next round began, one of the children decided that the game would be more intriguing if, rather than leave his chair behind in the hopes of finding another one when the music stopped, he simply took his chair with him.

Now this was, to my understanding, an example of basic cheating. Though we had never actually said that it was a rule of the game, it was logical to assume that one was not supposed to take one's chair along.

I braced myself for confrontation. I waited, poised to rush in should the horde rise and, in indignant outrage, attempt to smush. I stopped the music.

Everybody stood around and laughed.

I swear, that's what happened. No one was angry. Everyone thought it was funny. Funny! Here we were being confronted with an example of quintessential cheating, and everyone was laughing.

So, if they called this fun, who was I to stand in the way? If they thought that they were playing well thereby, well then, play on!

I waited for them all to be seated. They sat, eventually—all but the one without a chair, naturally.

I put the music back on. And this time, all of them took their chairs along on the march.

They were still, more or less, playing musical chairs. Every now and then, one of them would let go of a chair and try to find another chair that somebody else let go. But they weren't playing it the way it was supposed to be played. They were all having fun, but they were cheating!

So here was an important discovery for all of us. We found that there was a kind of cheating which—even though it can be considered unfair, even though it helps somebody win or keeps somebody from losing—was good, was right, which led us all to a game we could play well together.

The Well-Timed Cheat

I call this the well-timed cheat. It is the kind of rule-breaking that is done as much for the sake of play as it is for the sake of a player.

Which means that sometimes, in order to keep a game going, we have to change it. We either have to stop the game and discuss alternatives, which is difficult to do, or we can take an easier path and just cheat.

The well-timed cheat, as highly desirable as it may be, is a risky thing to try. For the cheating to be seen as well-timed, the cheater must have a remarkable sense of appropriateness—must know ahead of time that the intended violation of the game will be experienced as a reaffirmation of everyone's access to play.

The well-timed cheat works because a game isn't working. It helps us regain a sense of play that we had lost in the process of maintaining a game that we were no longer interested in playing well. It is a way to change a game so that we can keep on playing.

Boundaries

Another device to which we have access in order to keep the game going is the boundary that separates the game from everything else around it. Because there are boundaries, there are ways to get out of the game when you have to.

Play is a voluntary act. You can't play if you aren't willing to. You can't play if you feel you are obliged to. No game or toy can guarantee that it can make people play. You gotta be in the mood.

If there were no boundaries around a game, it would be extremely difficult for someone who would like to stay out of it all. It would be equally difficult for those of us who wanted to stay in.

One of the things that makes it hard for adults and children to play together is the difficulty they both have in maintaining boundaries. We get in each other's way. The adults would prefer that the children not play tag in the living room—especially because there are things and people in there which seem to be manifesting a sudden increase in fragility. The children would prefer that the adults join the game or at least stay still long enough to act as good obstacles should.

Suffice it to say that boundaries are so important to our ability to maintain a game that we build stadiums of genuinely heroic proportion so that we can keep the players separate from everybody else.

Boundaries help separate the game from everything else. They have a critical function in maintaining the fiction of the game so that the aspects of reality with which we do not choose to play can be left safely outside.

Boundaries also provide the individual player with the opportunity to make a judgment on the relation between the game and the willingness to play. If the game is too rough for me, I can, without disturbing the game, leave when I have to.

Occasionally it happens that I have a need to attend to, the satisfaction of which lies outside of the game. I do not wish to draw particular attention to this need. I merely wish to leave until I can refresh myself in whatever

way I need to experience refreshment. Knowing that I can cross the line, whenever I have to, helps me and everyone else know that, as long as I'm inside, I'm there to play.

Bases and Safe Zones

Then there are the times when I need to catch my breath. I don't want or have to leave the game. I just need to recuperate long enough to be able to play as hard as I want to. Neither do I want the game to stop because of it. I need to suspend, just for a moment or two, my participation in the game. I'd like everyone to know that I'm still in the game but I don't want anyone to think that I'm playing.

Anything can serve as a base—a tree, a mark on the ground, a piece of paper. In some games, like stoop tag, I'm safe as long as I'm stooping. In other games, like hug tag, I'm safe as long as I'm hugging someone else.

Whatever position or place I have to assume, I am allowed by this convention to be part of the game without actually playing.

When I'm in the place or position of safety, I can recover long enough to check the game out, to make sure that the game is going the way I want it to, to watch what's happening to other people, to regain composure.

But, because I'm still part of the game, I have a responsibility to it.

You are in hot pursuit and I'm being given good chase. However, you're getting a bit too close. The chase, as much as we're both enjoying it, is about to conclude. Actually, I don't want to be *it*.

So I squat or stoop or touch base. Fortunately, there are a few other players left in the game for you to pursue merrily.

Here I am, squatting or stooping or touching base. I'm safe now. As long as I stay put, I can't lose. I am experiencing gratefulness in relationship to this opportunity. You are probably feeling less grateful.

After a while, I also realize that, as long as I stay put, I can't play. This is bothersome. It was nice to know that I could be safe whenever I wanted to. It is less nice to realize that I can't stay safe and play at the same time.

At least I can get ready. I can tie my shoes or tuck my shirt or soothe my fevered brow. But how long can one tie and tuck and soothe?

And then I realize that everyone else but you is tying and tucking, squatting and stooping. I also realize that somehow this is unfair. You seem to be getting tired. As long as you're *it*, you have no safe zone. If you'd squat, the game would be over.

And so, in a sudden leap of compassion, I rise and allow you to give chase.

Again, no matter what conventions we create, the game is maintained by the manner in which it is played. If we aren't playing well together, nothing works.

Time Out

Sometimes it is important to stop the game itself in order to keep it going.

No matter how much we try to make rules clear and fair, there are times during a game when I as a player find that their implications are no longer clear to me. I thought they were clear when the game began, but now that I find myself hotly pursued by one of the toughest and fastest kids in the neighborhood, it suddenly occurs to me that I have forgotten where the base is.

So, I call time out. The game is suspended. It isn't ended, it's just stopped. The kid stops chasing me. I ask for clarification. So, where's the base? I find out. I call "untimes," or something to that effect, and run as fast as I can to the nearest base.

It is of utmost importance to the maintenance of the well-played game that we keep the rules clear. It is unfair that anyone should be penalized because of not understanding the rules. Again, this is evidence supporting the conclusion that games are really not exactly like life.

Obviously, "time out," like any other convention, can be misused. I can call time out so that I can gain some sort of personal advantage. I can keep on finding things that need clarification—especially when I'm about to lose. But such a misuse is so obvious, so threatening to the spirit of the convention and the maintenance of a fair game that I run the risk of being expelled permanently from the play community if it becomes clear that I am using it as a strategy.

"Time out" isn't playing. It's something we do to keep the game fair.

Interference

Another convention we establish to keep the outside world where it belongs is the rule of "interference."

When someone calls "interference," that person is saying that something, such as a telephone pole or a kid who doesn't belong in the game,

has invalidated the last play. The word is used to convey the message that what has just taken place didn't count.

We agree to this convention because we recognize that, in order to play well, we must be fully engaged in the game. If other realities are going to get in our way, we make rules that will allow us to play around them.

Getting Involved

The devices we have at our disposal for keeping a game going tend to become more and more legalistic as the concept of fairness evolves into a prerequisite for playing a game well. They are there to assure that the game is fair.

We establish such devices because we discover that, as we become familiar enough with a game to get totally involved in it, we tend to become a bit untrustworthy.

You know, you get involved in the heat of the game, you want to take the game as seriously and as fully as you can, and, if given the chance, you might in the blind passion of playing find yourself more willing that you normally would be to do something that closely approximates cheating—especially if no one happens to notice.

It's not that you're trying to be bad or inhumane or anything like that, it's just that you're so deep into the game that everything you do or think tends to become a strategy.

In other words, when you really get involved in a game, you forget yourself. In fact, the fun of the game lies in the fact that you *can* forget yourself. But what might happen is that you forget yourself too much.

It's odd, this whole rhythm of play and community. You establish a community so that you can play well together. You learn, in the establishment of such a community, that it is necessary to exercise real caring for other players—to be responsive to their needs, to be willing to be open. And yet, when you finally find the game that you all really enjoy, somehow, if you're not careful, that very game can destroy the community. The sense of play that brought you together in the first place can be taken over by the desire to continue the game.

In wanting to make a game as real as possible, we tend to make it too real.

And yet all this is part of the dynamics of the relationship between play, and playing well, and the well-played game.

So we make an elaborate series of conventions. These conventions are designed to keep the game fair, even in the heat of play. Then we establish other conventions so that the earlier conventions can be interpreted fairly and in the proper spirit.

As we move away from finding the game we want to play toward keeping the game going, we find it increasingly more difficult to establish direct, nongame communication. This is because we are all playing. Since we are all players, what we say to each other during the game tends to sound as if it were part of the game.

When we reach this point of involvement, we can't even say "interference" without it seeming like a strategy.

I don't think this comes from a need to be competitive. Neither does it seem to me to be a violation of the conventions we established in order to maintain our play community. Rather, I conclude that all this means that there are times during our pursuit of a well-played game when we become so deeply engaged, so thoroughly committed to playing all-out, that we are even willing to suspend the notion of community for the sake of the game.

Which means that the nature of the play community is such that, in the pursuit of a well-played game, when it really gets going, no convention is strong enough to make sure that we remember to care about each other.

So, we need something to keep us from causing real-world damage upon our playful bodies.

We need *the law*.

The Fair Witness

What we do, in order to allow ourselves the freedom of total commitment to our parts in a game, is establish roles outside the game—supportive roles filled by people who aren't playing. We establish fair witnesses in whom we invest the authority to stop the game.

These people are called umpires or referees. They are responsible for the fair conduct of the game. They are the ones to whom we give some of the responsibilities we would normally take upon ourselves. In so doing, we can play without having to think of anything else than playing fully, playing hard, reaching the goal, getting the ball, winning.

We give these people the power to stop the game, to ascribe penalties, to make judgments, to reward and punish. They are on nobody's side. They are official representatives of the community as a whole.

In other words, we recognize that our game has reached a somewhat dangerous state. We want to play hard. We want to play as hard as we can. We want to be released from having to make judgments on how caringly or even how legally we're playing so that we can focus on the game itself. It is too distracting to think about anything else.

As we continue to pursue this need to focus on the game alone, we find ourselves less and less willing to do anything other than think about the game.

The whole dynamic of the play community begins to change so that we can keep the game going.

We can no longer take the time to determine whether or not a particular rule is fair, or even helpful. We must give the rules even more force so that they can bind us to the game. They become regulations. They are made and upheld and negotiated for by our officials. They are not even our rules, they are the official rules.

We create an authority which is no longer within our control, no longer subject to the conditions of our community. This helps us keep our minds on the game. This helps us avoid arguments. We have others now who can do that for us.

As our rules become regulations, we create greater and greater distance between our community and those who govern it. Not only do we give our authority over to the referees and umpires, but we also allow their authority to be determined by an even larger authority, unnamed, unspecific, to which we ascribe the responsibility for determining the regulations by which we play.

The stronger the authority, the more we can focus on the game. We strengthen the authority until it reaches a point of total autonomy. It no longer represents the needs of any one player, or even the needs of our play community.

We have reached a point in the pursuit of our well-played game in which the game has taken precedence over our community. We have become a game community, if we are a community at all. We are held together by the regulations and the officials we have created to keep the game going. We no longer hold each other together. We are no longer in the position

to evaluate the game. We can no longer decide if the game serves the needs of our community.

In order to maintain the play community as well as the game, we have to give up a little of our commitment to the game. We have to restore our commitment to the community as well.

No matter how many auxiliary roles we create—timekeepers, scorekeepers, announcers, cheerleaders—we must find a way to return them all to the play community, to reaffirm their membership and establish some kind of assurance that these people in fact represent our community.

There are many ways we can accomplish this. We can take turns being referee or umpire or whatever else is needed for us to maintain the game. That way, we can make sure that people in those roles remember what it is they're there to help us do. We can decide that the referee will make a decision only if a player has asked for a decision—thereby assuring that the referee truly represents the needs of the community. We can state that a referee's decision only holds if all those involved in the decision agree that it is fair.

Clarity

We do all this because we cannot play if we are not clear. We create all these officials because we acknowledge that there can be no game if there is not agreement on its rules. We can even play with confusion, if we want to, but we can't play from confusion. We can select a game which leads us into chaos, but we must first surround that chaos with some order and clarity.

Rules are the binding force which permits us to be free together.

If we choose a game that is unfamiliar to any of us, if its rules are such that we are not certain of the consequences of following them—even if only one of us is uncertain—we are no longer playing from the safety and fairness that we created our community to maintain. We are, in fact, no longer a community. There is a separation between those who understand and those who don't.

Thus, before we even begin a game, we must take some measures to make sure that it will provide each of us with equal access to playing well.

We reaffirm the idea of boundaries. We make sure that anyone who needs to step out of the game may—that no one feels compelled to play a game that he doesn't understand.

We may, if our sense of each other's needs is strong enough, decide on a practice game.

The Practice Game

This means that we can begin the game with an assurance that the game won't count—that our objective is not to win, or even to play well, but to make certain that everybody understands the rules.

It is a wonderful act of the playing mind that we can establish such a thing as a practice game. We can actually declare a game void before we even play it, and still play. We can say, "This is the game, but this isn't the real game. The real game won't start until the practice game is over." Then, when everyone agrees that the game is clear, that its rules are commonly understood, we can really play.

It is such an act as this—an act of caring for each other, for attending to the personal need for clarity—that reaffirms and re-establishes the play community. It makes certain that the game is fair and that all who are playing have the same access to it.

We might begin the practice session with only a few rules of the real game so that we can explore them together until we are certain that each of us is able to understand the consequences of following them. Then we can add a few more rules, and then a few more, until we all agree that the whole game is understood. The practice session might consist of an entire series of partial games—each new game being an elaboration on that which we played previously. It is what we can do when we need to arrive at a common understanding.

In fact, our guiding principles might have nothing to do with kindness or caring. We might not at all be concerned with making sure that everyone is feeling happy. We are not necessarily playing for personal motives, be they kind or cruel. We are going through all this because we want to play well together, and we know that we can't really play well unless all the players understand the rules.

Spectators

Now that we all understand the game and have returned it to the play community, we look around and discover that there are some members of the community who have been watching us.

This is all right. We have made it clear to each other that no one is obliged to play, that we play only because we are willing to play.

It wouldn't help anybody if we were to stop the game until the onlookers joined or went away. We can make sure that everybody knows that everybody can play, but we can't keep anybody from watching. That would be too much of a violation of the condition of willingness. We know, we have decided that a player is one who wants to play. We know that we can't force anyone to play.

Actually, these people are helping us. We can sense their expectations, their purpose. They, too, want a well-played game.

They are reminding us, by the simple act of watching, that we have come together to play well together. They honor us by their attendance. Their presence is testimony to the probability that we will, in fact, be able to play this game well.

But their expectations are very strong. They aren't playing, they're just watching. Consequently, we begin to feel almost obliged to play well. We feel that we have a responsibility to them, perhaps even more than we have a responsibility to each other, to do something spectacular. We begin to give them what they're waiting for.

We have moved from *play* to *display*. Their satisfaction becomes more important than ours, their criteria for the well-played game, whatever we assume them to be, a stronger factor than our own experience of the game.

Even though the onlookers help us maintain our intention to play well together, they are beginning to affect our ability to make a clear judgment on how we are playing. We begin to look to them to see if we are playing as well as we intend to.

There is no blame. It's just that we need to institute still another convention. If people want to watch, why shouldn't they be allowed to? We can consider it part of our community outreach program. The problem manifests itself when we begin feeling their presence a bit more strongly than we're feeling each other's.

The Coach

So, we appoint a coach. It is the coach's responsibility to help us maintain our focus on the game. I know that my mom's watching the game. I know that my girlfriend is expecting me to rise to some act of heroism. The

pressure is just too strong for me. The spectacular things I try to do are spectacularly stupid. I'm hogging the ball. I'm refusing to let go of my chance for stardom. I'm just about ruining the game for my team.

The kind of coaches we need are those who can recognize and consistently reaffirm their responsibility for maintaining not only our team but also our opportunity to play well.

To accomplish this, our coaches have to be extremely sensitive to us as well as to the effectiveness of our strategies. They have to help us not only to get into the game but also, when necessary, to get out.

We can, and do, get too involved. When this happens, we begin to take the game personally.

When I'm taking the game personally, I'm generally trying to prove something by it. I might be trying to prove that I am, indeed, a wonderful person or a good player, or that I really understand the game and the best way to play it, or that you really don't understand. There are, in fact, a vast multitude of things I could be trying to prove.

When I'm in that mood, when I'm playing the game to prove something, the game takes on a personal meaning. I am personally invested, not just as a player but also as someone with something at stake.

I can't leave the game. I have to play until my point is won. And, as I've seen and said so many times, if I *have* to play, I'm not really playing. I'm not really playing, because I simply can't afford to lose.

It is not difficult for my sensitive coach to pick up on what's happening to me. In my every action in the game I manifest my overinvolvement. The light has faded in my eyes and in its place is the gleam of compulsion. I seek justification, not play. I am no longer interested in the quality of the game but only in the validation of my person.

The coach takes me out of the game. She has to remove me to a safe area from which I can regain a larger, more unifying focus. She has to protect me, the game, and even the community from myself.

It is strange that this can come to pass. It is strange that I can begin with the intention of playing well and end with the need to save myself. But it happens. Indeed it happens.

But I'm still amazed. How did it happen? Why couldn't I sense it taking me over? Tell me, coach, what did I do wrong? Why can't I play?

And the coach says, "Look, it doesn't matter why. What matters is that you weren't playing. You were trying to do something that the game isn't

for. You couldn't tell that someone was going to throw you the ball because you were too busy trying to get it. If you want to play, take this time to listen to yourself. Get to know the frame of mind you're in. Feel your tightness. Listen to what you're thinking—to the arguments that are going on inside you. Listen to the anger. Remember it. Remember that this is how you are when you can't play."

"But, coach," I say, "it wasn't my fault. The other guys were after me, I swear. They were trying to hurt me. That big guy over there, he was always singling me out. And where was everybody else? My own teammates? Where were they? Why didn't they help me? All they were thinking about was the game! It wasn't fair!"

"Take a shower," says the coach. "Take a very cold shower."

And in the shower, I try to wash the game off me. I can almost taste the bitterness. I was kicked out of the game. I wasn't even given a chance to get even. It wasn't fair.

I taste the bitterness, and I try to remember its taste. "Yes," I finally say, "this is how I am when I can't play."

And then I start up again. I get mad at myself. I blew it. I blew the game. I was needed and I let my team down.

I turn the shower on harder. I want the water to penetrate.

Yes, it's finished. I'm clean.

It would be best, for the sake of the community, if we could each be our own coach, if we could monitor the way we're playing so that, in trying to keep the game going, we could remember what it means to keep it going well.

Even the coach can get too involved in the game. Even she can take the game so personally that all she wants us to do is win, at any cost, for her sake.

It's understandable. In fact, it's almost traditional that a coach's sole function be to make her team win. But it is also contrary to our purposes, here, to this special case, to our desire to experience a well-played game.

Perhaps it would work best if our coaches didn't represent any team at all but were representatives of the community at large. Perhaps that way the coaches could keep the game, the whole game, going. Perhaps then I would be more clear about why the coach sent me out.

Better, though, if we were all coaches, if we were all referees and umpires and whatever else is necessary to keep the game going well.[2]

It is different. This convention, this idea that has led us to want to create a play community, is geared toward a different reality. Perhaps the realization that we have come to is that, when we find ourselves needing so many people just to help us play, we really shouldn't keep the game going anymore at all.

Notes

1. In the US, manufactured and distributed by Hasbro since 1972—see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastermind_(board_game).

2. See, for example, the concept of "Spirit of the Game" in the rules for Ultimate Frisbee.

5 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 dialog. Playing well means playing within that dialog.

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,[1] is not yielding positive results, well then you can turn over every card, as in the game of Las Vegas solitaire,[2] 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 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 ourselves) 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."[3]

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 selecting the source. 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 anymore. 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 more 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 together. 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 the grid looks like this:

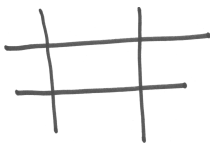

Figure 5.1

We also know that we could change how it looks. We could make it bigger or smaller or any way we wanted to:

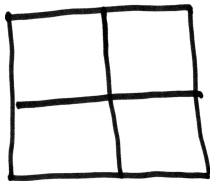

Figure 5.2

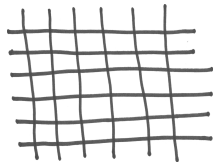

Figure 5.3

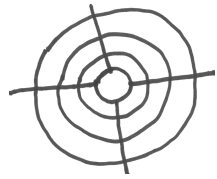

Figure 5.4

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 grid, 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 is the winner, and then the game is over. We could change the part about the game being over. 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 game called "tit-tat-toe"[4] that introduced a character named "Old Nick." 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 than 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, really, 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, your 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 the 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 altogether. That what we need to do, in fact, is forget the whole thing.

Notes

1. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canfield_(solitaire).

2. See http://www.uncp.edu/home/marson/360_solitaire_rules.html.

3. Paraphrase of Kant's "categorical imperative"—see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categorical_imperative.

4. Alice Gomme et al., *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland,* (New York: Dover, 1964), 296.

6 Ending the Game

Gerald and Jimmy had been friends for seventy-seven years. They had played together ever since they were old enough to understand what a game is.

Jimmy was on his deathbed. It was clear to both of them that Jimmy had only a few minutes to go before crossing over that great boundary into the final Safe Zone.

Gerald had been sitting with Jimmy for days, waiting to attend to his every need. Gerald had not slept, so great was his caring for his old friend.

Suddenly Jimmy began to raise his head.

Gerald bent closer, eager to discover what it was that Jimmy wanted. A wish, perhaps. A final wish. Words, perhaps. Words from the other side.

"Yes, Jimmy?" said Gerald through his veil of tears. "Yes, oh yes, I'm still here. I'm with you, Jimmy, my friend, my playmate of yore. Tell me. You can tell me. What do you want to say? What? What, oh slowly dying friend?"

Jimmy raised his hand, feebly, so feebly, motioning his old friend closer. Gerald lowered himself to his knees and leaned against the bed until his old, myopic eyes were able to focus on the sunken features of the final moment.

Jimmy, with what was obviously his final effort, reached up, until his arthritic fingers just barely touched his old friend on the head. And then, with a deep sigh, he sank down again, dropping his hand onto the cold sheets of his dying place.

"What is it?" asked Gerald. "What, oh what is it?"

Jimmy, his voice already sounding of the death rattle, whispered into his old friend's ear:

"Gotcha last!"

And passed, with a final chortle, into the playground of the disembodied.

What we have here is an example of one of your endless games—games that have no boundaries, that are played anywhere, and can be played forever.

Suppose, however, you don't feel like playing. Suppose you aren't even thinking in terms of games and suddenly you find yourself tagged? What do you do, when seeking the ultimate reality, the voice of the truth speaketh unto you saying, "You're *it!*"?

Obviously, this is not a desirable set of circumstances. If we can't stop playing, we lose the opportunity to respond to the rest of reality. The game takes over our perceptions until everything is seen as part of the game. If everything's part of the game, then where is the freedom? Where is the choice? Where is the referee? Who decides the rules? How do you make sure it's fair?

If everything's a game, if the game is everything, then all we can do, the best we can do, is play. But what if we don't feel like playing? What if we aren't willing to play? What if we want to stop playing?

Yes, I know. All this sounds like a mystical utterance proceeding from the wandering mind of quintessential whatifness, but, believe me, I'd never consider looking for a well-played game if I thought that once I found it I wouldn't be able to stop playing it. I could get killed, even, if I had to keep on playing no matter what. If I start a game of football or checkers or solitaire even and then discover that I can't stop playing—a game I can't get out of—what's going to happen to me when I get tired or hurt or broken? Can you call that fun?

So it's not only logical, it's essential that we figure out some way to tell when it's time to stop the game. Once we find the game that we really play well together, and we finally are really well together, what's going to happen then? What's going to happen when we don't feel so well in it, when we have passed that moment and we just don't want to keep it going anymore? If we're playing really hard, and if everyone is playing, and if there is no safe zone, no end point, no outside . . .

OK, I'm exaggerating. There really is, as a matter of fact, a way to end every game. All I wanted to do is point out that, without such means, the well-played game would be a game without players.

In order to establish the freedom to play, which is the prerequisite of being able to play at all, there is a complementary freedom that must be created along with it—the freedom to quit.

Quitting

Even though we all know that we're allowed to quit when we have to, it's hard to know when it's really OK. There are many reasons for this difficulty.

First of all, there isn't any rule which gives you the permission to quit. According to the game, you're supposed to continue playing until someone has won, or you have lost, or until some other goal has been reached. When you find yourself ready to quit, to leave the game, for any reason (you're bored, you're feeling sloppy, you just plain don't feel like playing anymore)—when you would like to be excused—you discover that, according to the rules of the game, there is, in fact, no excuse.

Secondly, there seems to be a conventional view which sees quitting anything—a game, a job, an attempt—as something you're not supposed to do: You gave up, you chickened out. Yes, you can quit if you want to, but, if you do, you're a quitter.

In all of our training, giving up is something which never seems to be included in the rules. It is logical, as a matter of fact. How can I, as a teacher, permit my students to give up when I know the importance of their achieving success? After all, they won't be able to survive in society if they can't read. It's my duty, my responsibility. If at first they don't succeed, they are to try and try again *until they do!* And me? Can I give up? Are you kidding? Give up on a child?

How can I, as a parent, give up on parenthood? It is my obligation. How can I, as a businessman, give up on trying to make the sale? How can I, as an honest person, allow myself to give up being honest?

Once again we return to the heart-warming realization that games are not life. Games are throwaway items. We play them only because we feel like playing them. They don't mean anything for real, and neither does quitting them.

So here's yet another function of the play community, yet another assurance that we can provide each other. We can allow quitting. We can provide for it. We can even justify it.

And, when the assurance is established, when we find ourselves playing a game—because we know that it's really all right to quit, that quitting doesn't *mean* anything—we know that we are all playing because we choose to play. We know we are all playing. We are here, in this game, voluntarily,

of our own free will. We are together because we want to be together. By our mere presence we reaffirm our commitment to the play community.

Because I know that you can quit whenever you want to, that you've quit before and so have I, we're each free to pursue the well-played game together, each according to his own definition of what that is.

I don't have to worry about why you're playing. I don't have to assume responsibility for the quality of the experience you're having in playing with me. Yes, if you quit, I'd be disappointed. No, I wouldn't take it personally. But the fact is, we're here, together, doing this thing with each other because this is what we want to be doing, with each other.

Suppose you want to teach me a game. Now, this game happens to be, according to your experience of it, a really fine one. You've played it at least a hundred times, and each time it's been funnier than the last. So you say to me, "Hey, Bern, I got this really funny game I learned. I've played it at least a hundred times, and each time it's been funnier than the last. Wanna play?"

It just so happens that I do want to play a funny game, so I say, "Yeah, it just so happens that I do want to play."

And you say, "Look, the rules are a little complicated. You sure you want to play?"

And I say, "Lay it on me, baby."

And you say, "Well, this game is called 'zap, zorch, boing, perfigliano.' It's really a drinking game, so maybe we should have a bottle of beer or something, if that's OK. I'll pitch in, of course."

So I say, "Happened to buy a case just yesterday, and I'd really be up for seeing what damage we do to it and to ourselves."

So you say, "You sure you want to play this game?"

And I say, "Sure."

And you say, "Well, we need about three more people, at least, actually, if we want to make this game really good."

And I say, "It just so happens that I've got company, and they're all people who like drinking games, and they just so happened to come in just this minute saying, 'Hey, anybody know a good drinking game?'"

And you say to everybody, "Well, it's called 'zap, zorch, boing, perfigliano.' It's really a silly game. I've played it at least . . . well, it's really silly. Sure you want to play?"

And we all say, "Sure we want to play."

And you say, "It's really complicated, but here's how it goes. See, first we all sit in a circle."

We sit in a circle.

"And then I'm going to turn to the player on my left, and I'm going to say 'zap' to him. I could also turn to the player on my right and say 'zap' to her, but I like starting on my left. You sure you want to play this game?"

And we all say, "Yes, yes, we do want to play this game. Yes, oh yes, we do."

And you say, "Well, whoever I zap now has four options:

l. to turn to the person to the left of him/her and say 'zap,' which makes it that person's turn
2. to turn to me and say 'zorch'; which makes it my turn again
3. to turn to the person to the left and say 'boing,' in which event I would know it was my turn even though boinger wasn't looking at me
4. to turn to me and say 'perfigliano,' in which case the person to the left of the person to my left would know it's his/her turn."

More or less.

The game is known by many other names, you further explicate, 'including: 'zap, zorch, boing, mcfigliano,' or 'mifigliano,' or just 'figliano,' and often played without the 'boing' at all, and sometimes 'zoom' instead of 'zap.'

"The object, despite what it's called, is to keep it going without making any mistakes. Are you really sure you want to play this game?"

And we say, "If we can figure out how to play it."

And you say, "Well, it's like this. See, if I zap the person on my left, that person can zap the person to her left, and that person can zap the person to his left, and on and on, see. Once you know what direction the zap is going in, then you just keep it going that way, see, unless somebody zorches someone, and then the zap goes the other way until somebody does something else to it, like perfiglianos it. A boing doesn't change anything, it just confuses people. Think of it as a zap with a head fake.

"At any rate, if anybody makes a mistake, like zapping the wrong way or responding erroneously to an elsewhere-directed boing, then that person has to do what we call 'chug-a-lug,' which means the same thing as take a drink.

"Of course, there are further variations, for example, we could go right instead of left, or the perfigliano can be passed to whomever you point at. Anyway, want to give it a try?"

And we really do want to give it a try. It seems like just the right game. You can't lose, unless you really try to win. It has just the right way of ending—with everybody smashed—and just the right feel of absurdity to keep us from trying too hard to play it.

Except that every couple of minutes you interrupt the game to find out whether or not we want to play.

You keep on saying things like, "Isn't this fun? Want to stop playing?" and, "Don't you love this game? Are you sure you want to play?" and, "Are you sure you're not getting too confused?"

If you could have known, somehow, that we were playing because we wanted to, that we would have quit if we didn't like the game—if you could have just let go of your feeling responsible for our enjoyment—we would have probably had a wonderful game. You never even gave yourself the chance to enjoy it. You were too worried that we were staying in the game just to please you. Too worried about why we were playing.

What we all need to know, in order to play well together, is that anyone can quit at any time for any reason. If we are sure of that, we can be sure that we are playing with people who want to be playing. We can get out of trying to decide whether or not people are doing what they mean to be doing, and we can get into the game, however it's played.

Quitting Practice

The first thing we need to do, if we want to make sure that we have clearly established the freedom to quit, is to practice quitting.

Well, why not? By practicing quitting we can at least find out where the hard feelings are. Since we're just practicing, any one of us might be quitting simply to find out if it's really possible, at the time—when winning, losing, when totally involved or completely bored, when having fun or whatever—simply, out of sheer whim, without meaning anything personal, to quit. Since we know we're just practicing, we know it's not for real.

It is a useful thing to do with each other, having this quitting practice. It helps us decide what we want quitting to mean. It helps us find out about quitting, about how we feel about quitting.

We need to do this because usually, in other circumstances in other communities, there is a meaning to quitting. When you quit when you're

ahead, when you quit when you're losing, it means something about you. You are demonstrating poor character. You're doing something unfair. You're not letting me get even. But, look, friends, quitting has nothing at all to do with character unless we make a rule that it does. And who would want to make that kind of rule? It would ruin our chances to play freely. We'd never be sure that this was the game that everybody wanted to play if everybody had to stay in the game, if no one could quit.

Yes, it's going to be a little weird at first. We're going to feel strange about the whole thing.

There we are, right in the middle of an absolutely tremendous volley. I make this really incredible return and you put your racket down and walk away. Geesh! What kind of thing is that to do to someone?

Here we are, locked in the heat of cunning, playing chess. I study the board, looking for possible ways of saving myself. Yes, it is clear, I am close to the end. Finally I decide to try one of my last-resort maneuvers. I push a pawn. Yes, I know, it is a despicable strategy, but maybe its very despicability will distract you long enough for me to come up with something better. I slowly raise my eyes to watch you respond to my manifest cleverness, and I find myself with no one to look at.

"Oh, yes," I say to myself, "we're practicing quitting. Ho, ho, and all that."

It's hard. The older we get, the harder it is, the more profoundly ingrained the conventional meaning of quitting.

Sometimes it is remarkably inappropriate to quit. For example, when you find yourself in the end zone, in the last ten seconds of the game, with the score 11–12, with you just about to receive the pass of the century, which, upon completion, will catapult you and your team and your country into international prominence. There's just too much else at stake.

We could announce when we feel we're going to quit—at least to prepare everyone else. But then, once everybody knows that we're just about to quit, the game feels different, as though it's already over. We can't play it well anymore, even for those last few minutes.

Maybe the thing to do is apologize after we quit—just to make sure there are no hard feelings. But if we apologize, we convey with that apology the sense that quitting means something. What we are trying to do is to make it a convention of our community that any one of us is free to quit, for any reason, with honor.

Quitting with Honor

All right, so we're only practicing. Nobody means anything by it. She quit because she's experimenting. She just wants to know how it feels. Look, let's keep our humor about this whole thing. We might forget what it is that we're trying to free ourselves for. After all, she's not really playing a game with us by quitting, she's just not playing anymore.

It's difficult to experiment with quitting. You keep on feeling cheated when someone quits. If he quits when he's winning, he's not giving you a chance to get even, so you're being cheated of that, aren't you? Or, if he quits when he's losing, well, you know, he's just a sore loser, and the game isn't over yet and he didn't even let you really win!

But it's a rule now, yes? We're allowed to quit whenever we want to. We all agreed to that. So, he's not cheating you. I know it looks like it. I know it really gets you angry. But you, dispassionately objective person that you are, need merely to absent yourself from seriousness for a while and accept the fact that the game is over. Perhaps he was merely tired or distracted or experimenting. No blame. No shame.

Later, as our understanding of quitting with honor becomes clearer, as it becomes an established convention of the community, we will begin to develop a better sense of the appropriateness of quitting. There will be times when we would normally choose to quit, when, for the sake of making sure, of testing, we will choose not to quit. This choice is as much a part of quitting practice as quitting is.

Yes, patience, persistence, perseverance are all qualities to which we should aspire. We should stick it out, keep a stiff upper lip, nose to the grindstone, and all that. In games, however, these qualities are valuable only insofar as they help us play well.

We might want to try again. We might want to see if we can extend that experience of excellence that we had for such a short time. But we don't have to. We might feel that the only way to understand the game is to stay in it as long as possible, but it is up to each of us to determine how long that is.

Quitting for Good

It might happen that we're not sure whether or not the person who quits can get right back into the game. If you quit now, can you join again a

minute from now? How about a half hour from now? Or is it going to be that if you quit, you quit for good?

As we begin to understand more about the nature of the well-played game, as we begin to establish a clearer knowledge of how our play community functions, we see that there are many rules and conventions which only work some of the time. A question like "How long can I quit for?" is answered, most wisely, by those profound words, *It depends*.

It depends on the game we're playing. It depends on how much we're needed. It depends on the people we're playing with.

Suppose we're playing chess. If I quit and you still want to play, you'll probably look for another partner. If you still want to play with me, you'll just have to wait until I feel like playing again. No, I haven't quit for good, I've quit for the time being. It could also happen that when I'm ready to play again, I discover that you're already playing with someone else. It's all right. It's all right.

On the other hand, suppose we're playing a free-for-all volleyball game. There are about a hundred of us playing with a six-foot-diameter ball. If you quit, who's going to notice? If you come back three seconds later, what difference does it make to the game?

However, until we understand the extent and the limits of the freedom to quit, until we have tested out all the ramifications and seen what hurts and what helps, quitting just won't be easy for us. It'll take some doing, maybe even a few misguided arguments, before quitting becomes natural and clear. It does seem natural for babies. They quit whenever they feel like it. So much more the delight when they choose to play with you!

But it's hard now, and we might as well recognize that fact and play with it instead of in spite of it. Let's start with the tiniest of quits, the least noticeable, the most temporary.

Sooner or later we'll be able to confront the issue that occurs when somebody wants to quit for good. When we are ready, it will be absolutely clear to us that when somebody quits for good there is simply nothing we can or need to do about it, because that person may very well be quitting, for good, for very good.

In the meantime we have yet another ramification of the freedom to quit.

Quitting for Effect

If you're not playing well, if none of us is playing as well as we've intended to, and you're the only one who perceives this, should you just quit?

You know that you've got the permission to quit. If the community is sensitive, your leaving the game will help raise a question. Perhaps it will result in a change. Perhaps it will bring people to look at the game and see that it's not really being played well.

If the community as a whole is not sensitive but there are members who are also aware that the game is not as we intended it to be, then your leaving the game might help them remember that they also have that option.

In such circumstances, you've discharged your obligation to the community by the mere exercise of your personal right to leave. Your quitting the game can help restore the game for others.

But quitting, even though it can have such a positive effect, is a last resort—especially if you want to affect the game.

If your motivation for quitting is to affect the game as a whole, you probably will not succeed unless the game is such that it depends on your participation for its existence. In fact, you are likely to get angry: there you were, trying to help everybody, and you were even willing to sacrifice your participation in the game just so you could bring the game to their attention, and nobody noticed. Nobody even noticed.

Quitting, as a message to the community, is very unreliable. It rarely works. We've already decided that in order to make quitting available to everybody in the community, we have to make sure it doesn't mean anything. We've taken special, careful steps to make sure that anyone can quit for whatever reason. If you're quitting because you want results, because you think that this silent protest will be heard, well, you're going to have to be a lot noisier about it.

Quitting is most useful as a means of self-maintenance, of providing you, and not the community, with a choice. The choice, once taken, can't symbolize anything else. You've quit because you don't want to play. That's what we've all decided quitting is—an exercise of individual rights.

So, you throw the paddle down on the table, you break your clubs over your knee, you tear up your season pass, pick up your marbles, and go home. "If that's the way you want to play, I quit!"

Unfortunately, the message heard is not the message you want to send. Your intention may be to raise consciousness, to realign souls, to serve the community at large. But the response—what you will hear, if you can still listen—is, "Sore loser." Check it out. Have you ever done that, have you ever thrown everything down and screamed, "I quit!" when you were winning?

Getting Back In

Here is something that never occurred to us until we actually tried quitting: It's hard to get back in. Now that we know we've got full permission to quit, how do we get permission to join?

If the game is already going, the only way we can get back in is by taking up a position in it. We can't ask permission without stopping the game or interfering with a player.

No one can give us permission. We'll just have to assume it's there.

Once our community is able to accept this—not as a problem but as a reality—we will be able to be more certain when the permission is there. We'll know that there are times when, in fact, we can't get back in the game. Somebody else has taken our place. It's too late, they're playing something else now. But those occasions will be obvious to us because we will have all played both positions—in and out.

When we are ready to join, there'll be no question at all about whether or not we'll be allowed.

Until we reach that time, however, some of us are going to find ourselves unable to decide. We simply won't be able to tell what will happen if we just walk into the game and start playing.

If you want to get into the game, there is little those of us who are playing can do to help you. If you can't tell, we're too involved in our game to stop long enough to tell you. If we had to worry about you, if we had to wonder whether or not you were feeling excluded, we'd have problems getting involved in anything together. We'd be so busy trying to make sure that everyone was doing what everyone wanted to be doing that we'd never be able to focus on what, in fact, we are doing together.

By giving you the guarantee that you can always join, whenever you want, we also give each other the guarantee that we'll be able to focus on the game.

We've accepted the responsibility to include you when you want to be included, but, in so doing, we've also given you the responsibility to do what you want to be doing. If you want to join, it's your decision. The invitation is always there. It is our convention that you can come in whenever you want to. But it's your responsibility to decide whether or not you want to join. We're playing. You're doing what you want. We're doing what we want. If you're standing around, watching, cheering, dreaming, alone—if

you want to play, we'll let you play. If you don't want to play we'll leave you alone to stand around and watch or cheer or dream.

Being Left Alone

I was teaching a games course. My classes were composed of anywhere from twenty to thirty children ranging in age from six to thirteen. The subject I was teaching was drama, but the educational objective was the creation of a community in which children could play safely, creatively, and supportively.

There was a little girl who came into the school in mid-year. She was assigned to one of my classes. Our community had been fairly well established and it was obvious to her and to everybody else that she was not yet a member.

When she came into the room, I explained to her about the safe area. The safe-area rule was something we had just recently decided on. A place was set aside where people who didn't want to play could just hang out. They didn't interrupt the game, and we kept the game away from the safe area. Anyone could go there for any reason at any time and stay there as long as he wanted.

She went into the safe area.

During the games, whenever things were clearly under way, I'd approach her and ask if she were ready to join a game yet. She always said she wasn't.

This went on for a couple of weeks. I was beginning to worry. After all, it was my job, as I conceived it, to facilitate the search for a well-played game. She wasn't looking. All she was doing was sitting, quietly, in the safe area, day after day. What if her regular teacher came in? Or the director? Wouldn't they think she was wasting her time there? Wouldn't they feel that I had been slack in my duties? I had had enough trouble convincing the administration that letting kids play games was an educationally sound practice. Could I come up with an educational objective that would validate her doing nothing?

Once, as I was going up one more time to invite her into the game, several of the children cautioned me. They said that she didn't want to play, that I was breaking the safe-area rule by asking her so much, that I should leave her alone. What did they know about educational objectives?

Except that we had all made the safe-area rules together. It was one of our major accomplishments, this safe area, one of our first real decisions. If I broke the rules, I would also be breaking faith. This faith, this trust, had taken a long time to establish. Should I have allowed such a rule to be made in the first place? It seemed right when we agreed on it. It seemed to be a real act of a play community, this rule. But no one had ever elected to stay in the safe area for so long. What of my responsibility? What of my commitment to the school?

I was being tested.

I asked if anyone thought we might change anything about the safe-area rules. Someone suggested that we bring in magazines and puzzles. I said, how about a time limit? I mean, is it OK if someone wants to stay in the safe area forever?

I laid my heart subtly bare. I didn't want to confront the little girl. I didn't want to have to confront her teacher. Unfortunately, I was seen through—thoroughly through. The decision reached was that there was to be no time limit. She could stay there, forever.

What if it became a trend? What if everyone decided to stay in the safe area? What if I wound up being the only one who wanted to play, while the whole class lay dreaming, and when the principal came in, there I was playing by myself!

The truth was, I had no choice. I'd been voted down according to the very democratic process that I myself had worked so hard to establish. Maybe I shouldn't have given them the choice in the first place. But now it was too late. I decided to grow a beard and wear dark glasses for the rest of my life.

Now, as you might well imagine, I wouldn't be going into all this dramatic detail about this case in point unless this case had the kind of point that was worth dramatizing.

The fact was, everyone continued playing except for the little girl and an occasional drop-out-in. After a while I was able to focus my attention on those who were playing. Those who were in the safe area were keeping to themselves. They weren't disturbing or destroying anything.

So, when the little girl came into the room, I always made sure that she knew I was glad to see her again. I could at least do that much. But once the session began, I could do no more. I could only play with those who wanted to play.

And guess what? One day this sweet, delicate little girl actually joined us for a game of hide-and-seek. That's what she did, after weeks of staying in the safe area. She chose, for whatever reason, to come in and play with us.

I didn't know whether I wanted to hug her or hit her (metaphorically speaking). After all, she had caused me all that grief, and now the little prima donna thought that she could just come in and play, just because she finally felt like it. On the other hand, she was playing. Finally. She was really playing!

I conjectured, as I am wont to do, about why she decided to grace us with her presence.

Well, I thought, hide-and-seek is a fairly safe game to play. One can hide as close to or as far from the base as one wants. One is free to decide the degree of challenge one wants to explore. Getting caught is no big thing. I suppose she found the game appropriately safe. It was also, no doubt, a game she was familiar with.

We'd decided to play hide-and-seek by the daytime rules. In this version, the first player caught is the next *it*. In the nighttime version, because it is more difficult to see each other, it makes it easier to communicate what's happening in the game if the last person caught is *it*. By that time, everyone is back home, and we can all be sure that no one has gotten lost somewhere.

At any rate, we were playing the daytime version, and guess who was the first to be caught? Yes, my friends, it was our sweet preciousness herself, Miss Shy.

I was sure this event would lead to catastrophe. Poor little Miss Shy. She had finally found a game she could feel comfortable enough to play. She had eased her way in, barely noticed. And now she was the focus of everyone's attention!

However, when Miss Shy began the game again, she was not the least bit shy. In fact, she ran around so hard, she played so thoroughly and so well, that the few of us who made it to the base without getting tagged felt as though we had played against Wonder Woman. It was that fine a game. She was that fine a player.

The next game was tag. Guess who wanted to be *it*?

All of which led me to the following conclusions: She must have been doing something while spending all that time in the safe area. No, she wasn't playing, but she was checking it out, making sure. And no one could

have made sure for her. She played, finally, because she believed, finally, that she didn't have to play.

Yes, I had other experiences playing with children in which one or a few of them never left the safe area. But I've been able to remember this little girl and what we found together. I do not violate their sanctuary. I know that they are doing something. I can justify it when necessary.

I've learned to play only with those who want to play—to focus my energy on those who are ready to share theirs with me. It has made things much easier. It has made our play into something that takes on its own life. We form the play community by making sure that it is comprised, at any given moment, of all those, and only those who want to play.

Yes, if you want, you can stay in the safe area forever.

The reason we need a safe zone, or a boundary, or a place that is clearly outside the game is that, at times, it is very difficult to let people know that you don't feel like playing.

It's especially hard when you find yourself suddenly in a game that you don't know how to get out of.

Endless Games

For example, suppose I feel like playing Echo. Actually, I'm the only one who calls this game "Echo." It's a very informal game, with no goal in particular. It's so informal that no one ever needs to call it anything. It's one of those games that you suddenly find yourself playing.

The game is simply this: Whatever you say, I repeat. Not much of a game, but it is played often, and it's even fun, sometimes.

So, you say, "Hi."

And I say, "Hi."

And you say, "Whatcha doing?"

And I say, "Whatcha doing?"

And you: "Oh, you're playing that!"

And I: "Oh, you're playing that!"

And you: "I really don't feel like playing that now. Catch you later."

And I: "I really don't feel like playing that now. Catch you later."

You: "Look, Bern, I really mean it, you know."

I: "Look, Bern, I really mean it, you know."

And, as we continue, it becomes apparent to you that there's nothing you can say that will stop the game. Nothing. If you tell me that you want to stop, I just repeat what you say, and you're back in. And you think to yourself, Well, gee, maybe the only thing I can do is walk away. And so you walk away, and so I follow. And so, unless one of us decides to stop playing, and that one is me, the other of us won't be able to find an easy way out. Unless, of course, you hit me. Which, violent though it may seem, is at least effective in communicating to me that, in fact, you really do want to stop the game. Unless, of course, I decide to hit you back. In which event, we have both stopped playing. Sometimes, the person who starts the game of Echo isn't really interested in playing with you. All he really wants to do is get you angry. When that happens to you, the displeasure you show only prolongs his interest in continuing the mockery.

On the other hand, Echo can be a very fine game. If we play it long enough, it can get extremely subtle. Somehow, in the course of it, we find that we have changed roles. Now, you're repeating what I'm saying. We echo intonation as well as language, body movement as well as facial expression. We can play this game very well if we choose to.

Unfortunately, there is probably no way, short of violence, to stop someone from including you in the Echo game. You can only hope the other person will have enough compassion to stop upon realizing that you really don't want to play, or will eventually tire of his/her cuteness and seek out another victim. But you can't tell him/her to go away. This is a word game, and, because words are what we're playing with, they can't be used to stop playing. The actual communication that takes place within such a game is nonverbal. Weird, isn't it, what we call play?

But, play it is, and well-played it can be. But when we can't play it well together, and one of us insists on continuing the game, it can be horrid.

Times like this, one tends to appreciate the value of a safe zone—one wishes to do whatever is in one's power to guarantee sanctuary.

There are other games that you often find yourself somehow included in, like tag, keep-away, tug-of-war. There you are, walking to the playground with a jump rope and one of the boys tries to pull it away from you and you try to hold on to it and one of your friends tries to help you and one of his friends tries to help him, and if the rope holds together long enough, zingo, you're playing tug-of-war.

And, playful as you might be, you don't feel that this thing that's happening to you is really a game. No one ever bothered to find out whether or not you wanted to play. The reason you're still pulling is not that you like the game but rather that you want to get your rope back.

Sometimes what becomes a game for other people never was a game for you. That kind of a game is one that people aren't playing with you—they're playing it *on* you. When you find yourself in that kind of game, the best you can do is let go of the rope.

Yes, that kind of game is a violation of what we intended to create together. But there aren't any rules we can make against it. If it happens, and people aren't really intending to keep it from happening, and you really don't want to play, give up.

Giving Up

Giving up is even more radical than quitting. Quitting means that you are out of the game. Giving up means that you let yourself lose.

You win. I give. Uncle.

You can try to give up just a little bit.

For example, you're playing a game of tag and you're really too tired to run much longer, so what you do is slow down in such an obvious way that you hope everyone will see that you're no longer a very interesting target to pursue. This works as long as no one tags you. When you're *it,* the only thing you can do is move so slowly that your comrades eventually realize that you're not very interested in playing. Then, they might tag you instead. And then, because there's no way out, all you can do is say, "I give," and walk as far away as you can.

In other words, there are strategies, things you can do while playing, which will keep you on the edges of the game. But they're dangerous. People could get angry with you for not playing hard enough. You are, after all, not being a very good sport about the whole thing.

So we need something else. Giving up, for all the problems it creates, still works, sometimes.

Yes, I know, it's hard to give up. It means things about me. It means that I wasn't willing to try anymore. But the fact remains that I couldn't play, that I didn't want to play. Of what possible value would it be to me or the community for me to stay involved in a game that I didn't want to play?

For all the negative connotations of giving up, for all that it can imply about my person, my caring for my team and all that, we can make it OK. This, again, is the power of what we can do as a community.

If it happens that we get so wrapped up in a game that we can't even let each other quit, we have the option, at least, of giving up.

It can help us all. It can help us recognize that we weren't playing the way we intended to be playing. It can provide us each with another guarantee of freedom. Again, it doesn't have to mean anything we don't want it to mean.

Losing

The easiest way to give up is by admitting defeat. It's a message that belongs clearly enough to the nature of games so that, when given, the other players who are still trying to win can easily let you out.

You say, "I guess I've lost," and we can go on pursuing the game without you.

It's finished as far as you're concerned. You're out of the game as far as we're concerned.

We've established losing as the ultimate end point. It coincides with all the conventions of games as we've come to understand them. Someone who loses is supposed to stop playing, her participation in the game is supposed to be over.

Though the idea of losing may not represent the highest of the possible unions between the gaming and playing minds, it is a clear and mutually acceptable way of ending something.

On the other hand, there goes along with that convention the implication that no one is supposed to want to lose.

If it becomes obvious to us that you've lost not because you really lost but because you wanted to get out of the game, we feel cheated. You should have just quit rather than waiting until you could lose.

If we're able to recognize that losing was your only way out, then maybe it's time for us to reaffirm our intention to play well, to re-establish the permission to quit, to find a different game.

It's supposed to be a bad thing to lose—a thing you don't want to have happen to you. You're supposed to be doing your best to win.

So losing is bad. It means that you couldn't win. On the other hand, of what possible value would it be to you to win a game that you didn't want to play?

For all the negative connotations of losing, for all that it can imply about your person, your caring for the team and all that, it is better for you, and the community, to lose than it is to play along—to pretend that you're playing.

So, here's yet another freedom. Yes, it's the last resort, but it's there.

Winning

When a game can be won or lost, you're supposed to want to win. The game is better for it. You play better. You ride on each other's energies, higher and higher, straining, stretching, until you reach that moment of the well-played game.

But strange things happen to you when you win.

I think, because I've found myself coerced into games that I didn't want to play—in gym class, in the recess yard—I've become more familiar with losing. I can handle it better. After all, if I begin a game knowing that I don't want to play, it's more in keeping with my expectations that I do, in fact, lose. If I win, I get confused.

Trying to end your participation in a game by winning it leads to a profound disequilibrium in the dialog between the playing and the gaming minds. If you don't want to be in a game and you decide that the only honorable way out of it is by winning, you aren't playing. You can't play. All you can do is try to win.

Every minor defeat forces you back into a game you want to get out of. You feel that you're being trapped into playing, forced into staying in a game that you no longer care about but must win, anyhow, at all costs. It doesn't work. Better you should quit, whatever people take it to mean about you, than try to win a game you are no longer willing to play.

On the other hand, winning is a natural end point for a game. It helps us define when the game is over. This is what we've been looking for—some clear way to bring a game to a conclusion.

But the contract between us is that winning or losing should be the result of what happens in the game. You shouldn't want to lose. And you

should think of winning as something that happens because you've played well and not because you've wanted to get the game over with.

As logical as winning is, as well as it works in helping us know when a game is over, it poses yet other problems to our community.

When you win, you feel somehow responsible for your opponent's loss. If you hadn't won, she wouldn't have lost. If, upon winning, you suddenly burst into litanies of self-praise, you feel, right after that outburst, that you haven't been very nice to your friend. She lost. She also wanted to win, as much as you did. She feels a little bad about losing. And there you were, rubbing her nose in it. There you were, so delighted with your accomplishment that you forgot about her failure.

You reach a point where you can't handle winning and you can't delight in losing. Something happens to you that you can't play with. It keeps you from perceiving the game as a shared experience. You end the game separate from each other—winners here, losers over there.

When you try to win, when winning becomes your goal, it becomes difficult for you to validate the conventions of our play community. You begin to evaluate how well-played a game is in terms of who won. If you won, it was a good game.

Once winning becomes the only goal, everything else gets lost. We wind up playing a game only if we think we'll be able to win it. We'll know that, in fact, we've won the game only when it's finally over. And, since we won't know for sure who has won or who has lost until the game is over, our goal becomes to get the game over with as soon as possible.

This is illogical. This is downright absurd. If you win, you'll feel bad later. If you lose, you'll feel bad now. And, when you're playing, the only thing you're thinking about is what's going to happen when the game is finally over—whether or not you'll win.

On the other hand, winning doesn't have to become the goal. We have already defined another criterion for playing—that of the experience of playing well together—which transcends any game we are playing. We can define winning as nothing more or less than what happens when the game ends.

When we focus on winning not just to end the game and not for the sake of winning, but in the pursuit of a well-played game, it means something else. The focus provides us with a challenge. When we compete, we have access to a joy, beside which the delight of winning is almost pale.

The joy is in the effort we make to win, in discovering that we can stretch beyond our limits, that we can provide each other with a loving opposition, the result of which is a validation of our unity. The challenge I face is the one you present me with. It is my hope that I, in return, will be able to give you a challenge, that I too will help us reach the well-played game together.

It is a gift we present to each other when we compete. We are each willing to play as fully as we can. We withhold nothing from each other, from the way we play together, from the effort. We go all out. The prize is not in winning, it is in the opportunity.

Think of the accomplishment, the real victory experienced by our community when winning and losing become unifying rather than divisive forces! Think of the affirmation of the spirit of play, of its evolution, its maturation, when your win or loss serves to bring you back into the community, to select more wisely, more knowingly the challenge you are able to offer or ready to accept. Think of the freedom we could have with each other if we knew that we could win or lose with the same sense of rightness that we have when we play!

But, this is a difficult accomplishment. It requires time. It requires a shared experience of being valued, not for winning, but for willingness.

We do, in fact, have a better balance among those we play with, a stronger union. Even in the midst of a game, in the heat of exertion, we can admire the way we are realizing this game. We can say, "Nice try," "Good play," and mean it, and know that we will be able to receive each other's appreciation as genuine, as caring.

It has to be clear that this appreciation is genuine, because words of appreciation can be used to mean something else. They can be said mockingly or bitterly. It is like what can happen in the game of Echo, in which our words are so deprived of meaning that the only way we can communicate is through gesture. So the authenticity of an appreciative remark also takes time to establish.

But we can make it understood that we do appreciate each other even when we are competing. There are times recorded in the annals of sports history when a player was universally appreciated for his accomplishments, even by those on opposing teams.

On the other hand, perhaps we're not ready to play that way, yet. Perhaps winning and losing is just too strong for us—we really can't handle it, despite all our good intentions.

Perhaps we could handle winning and losing with greater ease if, when somebody lost, it didn't really stop the game. What if we made it the rule that the game would continue until everybody but one or two people had lost?

Elimination Games

So now we try games like dodgeball, king on the hill, Simon says, musical chairs.

If you lose, you're out. Not much attention is drawn to your loss. The game goes on without you. And, sooner or later you're joined by other losers, or you've found another game and forgotten about the whole thing.

It will be clear to everyone when the game is over. Eventually there won't be enough people left in the game for it to go on any longer. When that happens, it's over. We can start another game.

We find that the people who are playing can focus their energies on the game. That the game gets more exciting as it's played out. As more people get eliminated, the confrontation becomes more intense between those who remain. It is a drama that is unfolding before us, and we enjoy watching the changes.

Yes, this way of ending a game seems to be working for us.

But, at the same time, we begin to wonder, if our purpose was to find a game we could play well together, what are so many of us doing on the sidelines, waiting for the game to end so that we can get back in?

This is what we're going to have to make a decision about. If it is easier for us to handle elimination games than it is to handle games in which we stop playing as soon as somebody loses, then we should play elimination games. But if it becomes contrary to our intentions, if we discover that too many of us are always out, maybe then we'll have to find a game that ends differently.

Ending Together

Then there are the cooperative or collaborative games, the pastimes, the silly games, exercises, group challenges, whatever. These are games that end only when everybody has either accomplished the goal or has admitted defeat.

So we play a game like human pyramid, in which we try to build a pyramid out of people. There are a variety of ways in which we can accomplish this. We can lie down on top of each other, we can kneel, we can stand on each other's shoulders.

This is a game that is especially difficult to quit. We're all in it together. We're going to try to make the pyramid as high as we can, with as many people as possible.

If we succeed, then we're all high together. If we fail, then we all wind up in a mess of human frailty.

We play it just as we do any other game that our community selects—in the attempt to play it well together. To make it work, we create a challenge. Building a pyramid with three people is nice. Building it with ten people is nicer. Once we build the pyramid, what else can we do? Can the bottom people crawl forward?

So they try, and we fail, and it doesn't matter to anybody at all.

We don't play these games because we want to make ourselves cooperate. That's not the idea. We play them because, at this time in the evolution of our community, we need games that we can all win or lose together.

If we do fall down, we have fun falling down together. In fact, the point of the game could very well become to see how long it takes us to fall down. In fact, we could so much enjoy this part of the game that we really wouldn't consider it over with until we all fell down.

Perhaps we aren't ready to play with success or failure. Perhaps what we need is a game in which nobody at all can succeed or fail—a game that is just plain silly.

For example, there's your game called "Thar's a bar."

It begins with everyone standing in a line, shoulder to shoulder. The first player turns to the second player and says, obviously, "Thar's a bar" (meaning: There, somewhere, in my imagination, at least, is a member of the ursine family, be it brown or black or white).

The second player then turns to the first and says, "Whar?" (corruption of the word "where"—an interrogatory as to either general or specific location).

The first player turns again to the second, pointing straight ahead while so doing, and says, "Over thar!" (indicating essential thereness).

And now, the second and third players engage in a dialog similar to that between the first and the second. It is important to note that an arm,

outstretched, remains outstretched for the duration of the game. Thus, once something is initiated by the first player, the message and position is transmitted down the line until everyone has been communicated with.

Once the message has been passed to the end of the line and all hands are outstretched and performing pointage, the first player begins again by saying, "Thar's another bar."

Again, the first and second players engage in dialog in like manner as they did before, as follows:

Second player: "Whar?"

First player: "Over thar." Only this time, since one hand is already engaged, the first player uses his or her other hand to demonstrate whereness.

As soon as everyone is pointing with both hands, the first player introduces yet another bar. Only this bar is significantly smaller than the previous bars, and is described in the following terms: "Thar's a teeny-tiny bar." Indicating location of the said teeny-tiny bar could be difficult at this moment, as the main pointing apparatuses of the human body are already occupied in demonstrating the whereabouts of two other bars. Therefore, when the first player is queried by the second player as to the location of the said teeny-tiny bar, the first player indicates the said position by crouching down and pointing with the chin. This is a complete crouch, knees fully bent, posterior close to but not touching the ground. The creativity of this response is a true testimony to the feats accomplishable by the playing mind.

When this message has been conveyed down the line, we all find ourselves crouched down, still shoulder to shoulder, with our arms extended. Yes, it is somewhat of a challenge to maintain one's sobriety and balance in such position.

At which time the first player addresses the second, and, in momentous voice, saith, "Thar's a great big bar!"

The second player, naturally, inquires "Whar?" The second player is quite intrigued by this time and is watching carefully for an act of high resourcefulness on the part of the first player. What appendage is that player going to use to point out the location of the great big bar?

The first player, with tone of high appropriateness derived from his previous acquaintance with this exercise, indicates the location of the great big bar by pointing with his left shoulder. Actually, this point comes closer to being a full-bodied lean.

This act causes the second player, of necessity, to perform sudden full-bodied leanage upon the third, which thus causes the third to lean upon the fourth, etc., which results in a total and complete breakdown of communication and any semblance of order. Everyone winds up lying on somebody else—human dominoes!

And then, somebody says, "Let's play again."

As you can imagine, this game can be highly inappropriate. It is not a game one would use to establish trust, especially if one is the leader of the group. It is a game, however, which can be most wonderfully appropriate—depending, once again, on the needs of the community.

This game is something we can actually play well together. If we find delight in it. This is a game we could elaborate on, if we wanted to—trying other configurations, having several leaders, introducing a few more bars.

But the sad fact is that this is a game that everyone, more or less, loses—a game that is most satisfying when we get fooled by it, when we wind up in mayhem and disarray. In fact, if, by the end of the game, we are still standing, the game would be dull indeed.

All of which is to demonstrate that there are many ways to end a game, that the objective of winning or losing is useful only insofar as it implements the search for the well-played game.

So, in establishing the conventions which allow us to pursue and make manifest the well-played game, we make whatever assurances we can that either the game will end of its own accord, or one can quit when one feels the need. Since it is easier to leave a game when it's over than to quit while it's being played—especially games like Thar's a bar—we find it best to play pointless games in which the wellness we are able to share comes not from the excellence of our performance but rather from the excellence of the joke we have perpetrated upon each other, the sublimity of the silliness, the perfection of the ridiculous.

Again, whether we are playing a game that all of us or one of us or none of us can win or lose, our criterion for choosing which game to play is based on our understanding of what we are willing to play well together.

The Interlude

Sometimes we get tired. The amount of energy we have used in playing well has taken us all beyond our limits.

On the other hand, we don't want to stop the game. The game is going well. It feels right. We're getting it, together.

In fact, we've really come to respect the game a great deal. We have shared some real moments of excellence in it. But we also find that we're not at our best at this moment. We can't really play well because we aren't feeling strong enough.

If we tried to continue the game, we'd lose what we are trying to do together. When we get tired, we tend to get more involved than we want to. We tend to get hurt and take the hurt personally.

So we need to find a way not to end the game but to suspend it for a while. We don't want to stop the game. We want to let it rest, to let each other rest, so that we can be at our best when we get back into it all.

We need a gentle transition into something that is clearly not the game, but that just as clearly establishes the fact that the game will continue after a brief pause for personal reidentification.

So, we create little rituals and big rituals—little and big things to do that have rules but are performed rather than played.

Halftime. The whistle is blown, the gun shot, the horn tooted. The players leave the field and the bands march in. Hotdog and soda hawkers, high school rifle squads, everybody gets into the act. And it happens in the middle, in the very middle of the game, in the heat of it all, we stop. Just like that.

And during halftime, we players talk about the game. We revise plans. We look at it again. We make it into a new thing. We restore hope or tone down excitement. Sure, we're behind now, but maybe, if we can pull together, we can devise a better plan. Hey, we're really doing great, but remember, we've got half a game left to go.

And though we're bustling about, planning and reviewing, we all know that we have been temporarily released from the game. There it was, just two minutes ago, so heated, so hard, so real, and now, because we've all said so, it has been turned off.

What I'm interested in here is not so much what happens during an interlude, but more in the fact that we are capable of creating such a thing—that, simply by deciding ahead of time, while we're still clear, we can actually make the game temporarily disappear!

Halftime isn't the only kind of interlude we can establish. The huddle is yet another interlude. Here, again, the game doesn't stop, but rather a

magic is created which places the game in a special kind of limbo known only to the playing mind. The game has been, it will be, but now it isn't.

And then the smaller interludes, the pauses. The batter taking his position—knocking the dust off his shoes with his bat, rubbing dirt on his hands, finally lifting the bat, poised. The pitcher checking the field, adjusting his cap, chawing, looking for signals. And then, the pitch. And then the game. And then, the next interlude.

Baseball is a study in interlude. Every aspect of the game has to be prepared before we allow each other to play. Each moment of play surrounded by ritual, bracketed, relished. In fact, it seems that as a game becomes a sport, as the rules become regulations, more and more interludes get woven into its fabric.

Yes, I know, the interludes I'm describing aren't as rich as perhaps we would like them to be. The game is not suspended enough. Yes, the band is playing, the players off the field, but they are off separately, as teams, each to their own dugout.

We huddle, but we don't huddle with you. You're the other guys.

But it is enough for us to know that there is such a thing as an interlude. It establishes a precedent from which we can create a new convention. We can use it the same way we have used it to strengthen and cherish the game except that we will use it to strengthen and cherish the community. When the game gets tough, the interlude will be the tenderizer.

Maybe we might want to adapt some of the interludes used in the martial arts. For example, there are the handshake, the bow, the touching of swords, the embrace. These are all bona fide interludes, after all. They help restore the balance necessary to mastery. They are seen and experienced not as something that in any way violates the game but rather as tools, as a switch that turns the control back to the players.

Perhaps a meditation period. Maybe for the minute after a point is scored. An embrace, perhaps, between teams.

An interlude could be something that allows us to turn the game down—to turn the volume off just enough so that we can hear each other again. It has to be something that lets us start again almost from where we left off—but a little ahead. We haven't stopped the flow, we've just slowed it down enough to get back into it.

A dance, perhaps?

The Postlude

Often, after a particularly well-played game, after playing hard and fully, we discover that we have ended divided. Your team is here, my team is there, and we each go our separate way.

This is a hard moment. We were all so high that the crash is too sudden, too jarring. We can't get ourselves together again.

We need another ritual—something we can do to end the game together. A different kind of ritual, though, less a performance, more a favorite thing to do.

In golf, the institution we've created for this purpose is called "the nineteenth hole."

The nineteenth hole is, as a matter of fact, not on the course at all. It is a hole that lets us drain off the intensity of the game. The nineteenth hole is a bar where we can soften the memory of the game with beer and liquor until we can reconfirm the unity between us which has led us to playing together. Here, the best shot is performed not with a golf club but with a small glass.

After the game we go out for beer and pizza. When the cards are finally put away, we have a cup of tea together.

During this time, we may relive moments of the game. We tend to be remarkably kind to each other, reassuring. We express our regret at the circumstances that brought the other to defeat—rotten club, sticky deck, bad lighting, whatever. We review the moments of excellence we found during the game. We joke, get drunk, dance, eat, lie around—doing whatever we can find which will allow us to end the game and continue sharing.

Eventually this becomes part of our convention for playing together. It's tradition. We never play a game without finding some way to wrap it all up.

Perhaps we just don't want the game to end. Perhaps what we're looking for is a way to make the experience of playing well together into something that lasts forever—even though the game is over.

So we talk about the times when we were really playing well. We can't let those times go without savoring them.

We talk about what we can—the moments, the particular plays. That's all we seem to be able to talk about. The game as a whole is too difficult to hold on to. So we talk about the plays. We talk about the good ones and the bad ones. Maybe we're able to agree on the parts that were really good, and we can discuss how we got closer and further, how we felt that

goodness, how we won it and lost it and perhaps won it back again. But these moments are also gone.

Perhaps we need trophies. Perhaps we should dedicate a displaycase somewhere—in a common place, where we can all pass by and look at the gold-plated cups that no one can drink from, loving cups that we can fill with memories, plaques that we can permanently engrave, and a host of battered relics of aging victories.

But these don't last either. The real prize seems to have already vanished with the game. The real prize seems to be within us, within whatever change occurred to us as a result of playing well, as a result of whatever happens to us when we experience excellence.

Sometimes the talk doesn't work. We get a little too close to arguing about the game. A sign that this is beginning to happen is when we hear each other saying things like "I should have," "You should have," "They should have," "How could they/you/I have?" "Why didn't you?" "If only I/you/he/she/it/we/they". . .

For some reason, we don't allow the game to be over with. If we still have enough of a community in common, we can take this as evidence—we can conclude from it that we need to change the game or the way we're playing it. We're getting too involved, too deep into the game, so deep that we can't stop playing even though it's over.

If this continues, no postlude, no bar will contain enough to stop the game.

Which means that the next time we play each other, it'll feel like the continuation of the same game. No matter what game we're playing, we'll see it as a chance to get even for the last game, for the game we played before and couldn't stop playing.

I call this state of mind "tournamentality."

Tournamentality

This is a remarkably dangerous state of mind—one which threatens the very existence of the play community. If everything we've done isn't enough to turn the focus back to the players, away from the game, we will be led inexorably away from our ability to determine whether or not we are playing what we want to be playing. It brings us to the point where there is only one game to play—the one we can get even in. The game we look for is not

the game we can play well but rather the game that will let us make up for all the losses we've suffered—all of them!

It is so remarkably dangerous because it subverts all the freedoms we have been trying to establish through our community—we can't quit, we can't change the game, we can't, as a matter of fact, even play. We have to win.

It's a circle—a closed circle which will admit of no novelty, from which there is no escape with honor, where there is no humor. It seems to us now that, in fact, our very honor is at stake, and the only way we can recover it is through winning.

It leads to more, to worse, even. Now, when you play this game, even though you've never played it with me before, you're playing to get even—not with me but with what I represent to you, all those terrible people who cheated you out of your right to win.

Then how can we ever play together? How can we even meet each other in the game if we're seeing each other as representing somebody else?

If it is possible for a game to go bad, then this is what does it. This is the frame of mind against which the community can do nothing—tournamentality.

I used to play chess with my father. He always won. But he always laughed at me when I did something stupid. He loved me, but chess was his game. And now, when I play chess with you, I'm afraid to lose, afraid even to look up at you, because it's my father I really want to beat—and this time I will.

So you win this game. But you're still not sure. You still can't tell whether or not you've finally gotten even. So you have to try again—again with somebody else. No, you don't want to play her again. She already lost. You have to try other people. You have to become world champion. That'll show everybody. And that, even that, won't be enough. What about all those other people you don't know about? Maybe there's a better player than you, lurking somewhere in the Andes, just waiting until you learn about her.

This is the disease that has kept us from play. The reaction against this disease has resulted in our refusal to play. We're afraid of what will happen if we start it up again. We're afraid that we won't be able to stop.

The idea of the play community, like any idea, rests in the awareness of those who give it life. If we who are creating a play community fall victim to tournamentality, we lose our awareness of any intention save that of proving ourselves, to the world. If we can't let go of our games, we can't hold on to each other.

7 Encore

We now know it can happen—despite all our attempts to find a way to end a game—that we get too involved. We find ourselves in games that we can't get out of.

Something happens to us when we try to keep a game going longer than we should. Yes, there was a time when the high we achieved through the game was so high that we all became excellent together. Yes, we played that game well and, through it, achieved a state of absolute health, of encompassing wellness. But now that game is over. It's over, in part, because it was as fine as it was. We wanted to make it happen again, exactly as it happened before. But we can't.

A well-played game is never the same—never well the same way. As soon as we experience it, we change because of it. It is too powerful an experience. Its effect on all of us is too strong.

The game, because we were able to play it well, renewed us. And now we are newer than the game can be. We need a different game. We need a game that is as new as we have become.

We tried to keep the old game going. We tried to prolong it as much as we could. No, we didn't want to change anything about it. We wanted to make it last.

We made more and more interludes, instituted more and more rituals. We reached a point where it was taking us two hours to play a game that might have lasted only fifteen minutes. But somehow we could see that the harder we tried to keep it going, the smaller the game became. The opportunity to play the game, to play it well, shrank until it was barely accessible, until we were more honoring the memory of what the game had been for us than giving life to what it could become.

Yes, we were able to play it well indeed. We could challenge each other deeply, completely. But that particular wellness and that particular

challenge is no longer what we are looking for. It's the same, and we have become different because of it.

I don't think there's a game that's large enough to stay as new as we are. I don't think we would be able to play such a game. It would be too big for us to handle.

I think that in looking for such a game, something else happens to us. We begin to change ourselves in order to stay in it.

Thus, the master chess player can recognize herself as a competent, fully functioning human being only when she is playing chess. Thus, the professional kite flier is no longer able to delight in the calm that comes between winds.

You jump the hurdles faster than you or anyone else has ever jumped before. You make new records. And then you spend the rest of your life trying to do it again. The rest of your life!

Yes, you had indeed been excellent. You were so fully engaged in the game, so completely present, that your excellence changed the game for all those who played after you. You established a new technique that now everyone uses—a new opening, a new style, a new grip.

But it's not the same anymore. You don't seem to be able to make it happen the way you want it to. So you try to remember: How did you feel when it happened? What were you thinking about? How were you standing? What were you wearing? What was the weather like? Who else was there?

And, try as you might to get back—to achieve what you achieved in a moment of transcendence two years ago—you can't. It's gone. It's over.

It turns out that it wasn't the game that brought you there. It was you that brought the game there. The excellence that you achieved was not because of the game. It was your excellence that changed the game. The game was excellent because of you, and the people with whom you played.

When you try to save the game instead of continue the excellence that has gone beyond the game, you suffer, the game suffers. In order to experience that excellence again, you must admit the possibility that you're going to need to find another game, or something that isn't a game at all; that the game is, in fact, over and that it's time for the search for yet something else.

We tend to become a game community. We know that. We tend to confuse the excellence we have been able to achieve with the opportunity the game has given us to make it manifest. In holding on to that game, we let

go of the opportunity to discover the excellence again, in a different form, in a form that returns us to play.

In order to restore the balance, we need to find other games. We need, once again, to try games we've never played before. We need to try making up new games, to explore different kinds of games: cooperative games, silly games, intense games, quiet games. We need to see what else we can do together: create, dance, work.

Being Sure

The question is, how can we be sure that the game will be right for us? How can we tell, ahead of time, whether everyone will be able to play it well, will want to play it well, will enjoy it?

Once again, we can only rely on our willingness to play. All we can do is try, and see what happens. We have to be able to say, no, this game wasn't right. We didn't play it the way we wanted to. Maybe we could make it better. Maybe we have to keep looking for something else. Dominoes, maybe. Maybe singing.

We have to be willing to let the game go. Whatever game we decide on, we need, first, to know that we can leave it behind. If it doesn't work, if it really turns out to be something we don't like doing, we have to allow that to happen, too.

There's yet another freedom we need to establish with each other—the freedom to play a game that doesn't work.

Yes, I know, it's hard. Especially if you're the one who thought up the game in the first place. You tend to feel that you own it, somehow, that you're responsible for its being good or not. You tend to feel that it's your fault the game turned out to be such a bore.

OK, sure, we all agreed to try the game. We all, somehow, are responsible for it. But maybe if we played a little longer. Maybe if we tried to change it a little. Maybe we haven't given it enough of a chance. Come on, folk, let's keep it going. It's a good game, really. Everybody else likes it.

You need to know that there'll be no blame—that the responsibility for the game was everyone's, that your responsibility ended as soon as we all agreed to give it a try.

It happens that people take too much responsibility. They insist on keeping the game going. They insist on our playing the game the way they

understand it should be played. They take on so much responsibility that they actually keep us from playing it at all well.

"No, you're not playing it right." "Wait a minute, you should be running harder." "Look, these are the strategies you're going to need." "Come on, everybody, give it a real try—for my sake."

It is a matter of faith. We need only to know that the people we are playing with are trying the game because they want to try the game—not because of what we have told them, not because it is our game, but because we are looking for a game that we can all play well.

We need to be able to share the responsibility. When we all own the game, when we all acknowledge that we are merely trying it on, seeing if it fits, because it might work, no matter who suggested it, we become remarkably, astonishingly empowered.

We can try anything. We can try ridiculous things. Absurd things. Heavy, serious things. We'll play with it. We'll check it out. If it doesn't work, who's to blame? It's not the game's fault. It's not our fault. It just didn't fit.

And so we find we can play with more than we ever thought we could. We can play more kinds of games. We can meet each other in more kinds of ways. Even if it happens that none of the games we try are truly, exceptionally wonderful.

It happens that we even find it good to play a game that doesn't really work. There is an excellence that is not confined to any particular game but that is in the community, between us—an excellence more profound, more permeating than any excellence we could find in a game, a real, genuine excellence that we manifest not through what we play but through the way we have become because of our willingness to play.

This willingness to try results in the restoration of the community. It returns to us the sense of expertise. It crystallizes for us the understanding that, even when we can't be sure of the game, we can be sure of each other's willingness to play. We are, after all, the only ones who can tell what a well-played game is for us. We are the only experts.

We do have some information, though, that we can at least draw from. We have become familiar with the things we like doing together. We can look for the aspects of our games that have become consistent themes.

For example, perhaps what we like about tag so much is the chase. Most of the games we play well have some element of chasing to them—football, hide-and-seek, prisoner's base, capture the flag.

No, it isn't just chasing. We also like that experience of strategizing. We like that moment that comes right after the confusion, when we try to figure out which way to run, when we find it.

Suppose we discover that our favorite game is pool. Maybe marbles would be a good game to try. It's the same idea, more or less. There's something about aim and accuracy and getting things to hit each other. Maybe darts, though. Maybe it's the skill part of it that we like best. Maybe archery.

The only information we have that is anywhere close to reliable is in what we have been able to play well together. When we find that, we are able to perceive a theme, a commonality—we have something to draw from, a generalizable experience of what we like to play with.

When we have some clear concept of what we enjoy, we can focus on that and make judgments about the rest of the game: One rule brings us closer to our goal. Another rule moves us away. We're playing with too many marbles. What we need is more space so we can enjoy the opportunity to see our skills. Let's try with just five marbles apiece. There are too many people to chase. There's not enough room for the kind of run we want to make.

This is the most solid stuff we are able to find—the things we enjoy doing. When we look for what we don't enjoy, we are tangled in a web of infinite possibilities. We have no center to refer back to. There's too much to point to—a rule, the way somebody looked at us, the color of the marbles, the ground, the air.

But even that information isn't so reliable.

Yes, I know, you don't like chess. You've never enjoyed it or anything about it. But how can you tell that you won't like it now?

And, yes, this game is very much like chess. It's a strategy game and you've never liked strategy games at all, ever.

But maybe, maybe, just at this time in your life, in this place, with this person, maybe the *only* game that you'll be able to play well is a strategy game. Maybe you've changed since you tried it last.

We look for clues. We look for the nuances of the games, of the way we like playing with each other. But, no matter how much information we have, it seems, doesn't it, that we won't really be able to tell until we've tried. After all, what's there to lose? It's *only* a game. As long as we're willing to play, as long as we can maintain that willingness, as long as there is a

play community, why not try? Really, actually, honestly, when you think about it, what is there to lose?

If we know that we can't lose each other, if we are so clear, so sure of our community, there is nothing at all to lose. There is, in fact, a reaffirmation, every time we find a game that doesn't work, of the reason we are playing together.

This is the reason for our community. This is the reason for all the conventions we have created together. We know that as long as we're all looking for the same thing, we simply can't miss. No matter what happens, we will find each other. If the right game is anywhere around, if we know it, if we can learn it, we'll find in it what we've already found in each other—the excellence of who we are together.

If there is a right game for us, since we've already found games that are right for us, we know that we can find the rightness again, in another game, in a game that we have played before, in a game that is completely new. We know that this game, because it isn't working for us, is pointing us to another game. And that that game, if it doesn't work, will point us to another. And then, when we find a game that's right for us, when we are able to play it well, we can look for yet another one.

Intuition and Willingness

And then we discover that, in fact, we do know what games to try next. We don't even have to discuss it with each other. We've become so sensitive to ourselves, to the community, that we can sometimes tell with astounding accuracy exactly what game we should play next.

I was playing with a group of fourth-grade children at the Powell School in Philadelphia.

I had been playing with them once a week for several weeks. I asked them if they would like to be taped on my recently acquired videotape machine, and they said, yes, they'd like to see themselves play. We all thought it would be fun. I felt, from playing with them before, that it wouldn't be too much of a distraction. They wouldn't be terribly self-conscious just because they were being taped. They were having too much fun together, I thought, to give it up just so they could do something different for the camera.

So I set up the machine. While I was doing it, different children came up to the monitor to watch me and to discover what this TV thing did. The camera was on, and they could see each other on the screen.

This led to a lot of basic clowning around. Making faces. Jumping up and down. Much happy silliness.

It was beginning to look as though the equipment was going to dominate everything, as though they were going to be more interested in playing with the TV than in playing with each other. I was just about to turn it off and suggest a game, when two girls started playing some sort of hand-clapping game, like patty-cake only much more complex. I thought they wanted me to take a picture of them while they were playing, so I did. Only they weren't even paying attention to me. They were merely playing.

And what they were doing together was also quite astonishing. I had never seen such a complicated version of patty-cake—involving the backs of their hands, their shoulders, elbows. It was a real feat of coordination, it was.

Some of the other children started watching the game. Then another couple started playing it. Then more couples.

Then the girl who had started the whole thing stopped playing, just like that.

She waited and watched. Then she started a singing game with two other kids who weren't playing. Soon everyone was playing the singing game. Even the boys!

And then, just as the singing game reached its high, she switched it into a game of follow the leader. She just kept singing, but she moved out of the circle, turning back occasionally to make sure that people were following her.

And they were!

For the next twenty minutes I just stood behind my camera, trying to see everything. Sometimes kids started their own games. Sometimes some of them would just sit around, looking out the window. And the little girl seemed to be everywhere she was needed—wherever there was another game to start. And she always seemed to get to the right game. Sure, some of the games fell apart after a few minutes, but they felt right at the time, and when they fell apart, she found another game to keep everything together.

She knew. She could sense the community. And no one ever decided what game to play by meeting and discussing and deliberating. No one ever thought about changing the room around so that they could have more space—they just played over and under and around the chairs and desks, with the blackboard, with books, always somehow playing safely, always playing fairly and hard, and nobody got hurt.

It's recorded.

We can and do get to the point where we can tell what's appropriate. We can see each other that clearly. We can respond that easily. The more we play together, the easier it becomes. We develop a sensitivity, a form of intuition. The communication seems to take place on another level. We can know without deciding. We can know that we are capable of knowing.

This happens about the same time as our willingness to play becomes fully realized. This is all very convenient. We are so willing, so familiar with the nature of the play community, so certain about the genuineness of our intention to play well together, that just about any game will work. No game will come between us and what we want to make happen. We really don't have to find a perfect game. Any game will work. Any game at all.

Which is another thing about willingness and our ability to find the right game. More than likely, when we find the game we can really play well together, it will take us by surprise. The more willing we are, the more open we are to almost anything that might happen between us, the more we can get surprised.

There is something about the discovery of the well-played game that always takes us by surprise. No matter what we do to arrange for it, to make it possible, we really can't predict what it's going to be like when it happens. All we know is that we are willing for it to happen.

In any other circumstances in life, what we want most is predictability. When we're not playing, when we're trying to do something that we want to think of as important, we don't want to be really surprised. We don't want to be surprised when we're driving, when we're working, when we're doing something for the sake of our survival on this planet. We're too invested in that to accept the possibility that it might not work out the way we want it to—especially if it turns out to be something we didn't want to happen, especially if it becomes something dangerous.

We don't want bad surprises when we're playing, either. All the effort we've made to establish our play community has been directed toward making sure that the surprises will never be too bad. And it works—when we're playing, if we're playing well, none of the surprises are bad. We've constructed other things—such as the conventions of the play community, and the rules of the games we play—not to keep us from bad surprises but rather to help us maintain the balance, no matter what happens. That's the

safety we're talking about. That's the guarantee we've established with each other. It is that safety which nurtures our willingness to play, at all, ever, anything.

The Prelude

And so we play on. Sometimes we play as many as thirty different games in a couple of hours. Sometimes we play only one game. We begin to discover certain games we really like, just about all the time—pool, Monopoly, hug tag.

These games always seem to work. For some reason, we begin to know, even though we're not absolutely certain, that this game is going to be a fine experience for us. Perhaps we're fascinated with it, somehow so deeply appreciative of the concept of the game itself that, even though we don't happen to play it particularly well, we appreciate its fineness.

We begin to want to make sure that everything is just right. The pool table has to be absolutely level, the cushions appropriately live, the cues straight, the balls polished. There should be chalk for the sticks, powder for our hands. The lighting should be even, the space around the table ample.

The Monopoly game should have all of its pieces. The money should be in good order. Let's get a nice, comfortable place for it. Let's get some kind of snack. How about some background music?

As we find the games that continually fascinate us, that always provide us with an opportunity to play the way we like playing, we begin to appreciate them more profoundly, to want to make sure that everything is absolutely appropriate. We sense the fineness of the games and we want to make sure that we have full opportunity to appreciate that fineness.

Now, we don't want to rush into anything like this. We're liable to miss something—oh, I don't know what. Maybe it's the anticipation itself that's so pleasing to us. We're going to like the game. I mean, we might. It feels like this is the one we've been waiting for, that we all find to be really delicious, if you know what I mean.

I find myself being called upon to lecture. The topic itself is such that it merits a more formal treatment.

And now, to: "*An Analysis of the Value of the Prelude as a Factor in the Pursuit of the Well-Played Game.*"

Are there any questions?

You ask, What is the value of the prelude as a factor in the pursuit of the well-played game? I answer, as I am wont to do, that one must first observe the phenomenon itself before one can determine accurately its relatedness to the whole—that whole being, of course, what we are referring to by the phrase "the well-played game."

I take, as my text, the rules of the children's game of lemonade.

Lemonade is played as follows:

There are two teams. The teams are on a playing field of indeterminate measure. Suffice it to say that the teams are standing opposite each other, a relatively good run apart, between eleven and seventy-eight meters in most cases.

Behind each team is a line. Behind that line is an unspecified area which functions as a base for that team. It is one of your more basic bases—a safe zone, as it were.

Now, one team, which we shall call Alpha for the sake of clarity, has congressed, previously, within their safe zone, and decided on a profession of some sort—trolley-car conductors, educators, streetwalkers, or something of like likeness.

Alpha begins the game by marching forward, toward the opposition, several steps in unison, while chanting, "Here we come!"

The other team, which I shall call Beta, responds by marching forward, presenting a common front, while declaiming, "Where from?"

Whereupon Alpha takes a few more strides forward, still in unison, stating, with rather undue severity, "Philadelphia!"

Actually, they could lay claim to any town or area as place of origin. I have seen much latitude as well as longitude taken in this part of the game without any perceivably ill effect. Suffice it to say that "Walla Walla!" could be deemed equally appropriate.

Beta responds to Alpha's statement of origin by asking the eternal question: "What's your trade?" While taking several more steps forward.

By this time, as you can well imagine, both teams have drawn closer to each other.

And now the Alpha team says a most unusual thing. Had I not seen this game in print as well as in play, I might have concluded as a naive observer that their statement had no purpose at all. However, after several years of rigorous observation and self-examination, I have been able to determine that the response, "Lemonade," is, in fact, total nonsense.

Total nonsense, as I will say elsewhere, does have its function. At any rate, the name of the game is lemonade, so the word is not completely out of context. Yet it does lead one to wonder why the game is called lemonade in the first place. Were it called lemonade because of the use of the word "lemonade" in the text of the game, one would have a rather *in circuito ex nihilo* perspective on the whole configuration, which I seriously doubt would be healthy.

Suffice it to say that the word "lemonade" is used, invariably, whenever the game of lemonade is played.

At any rate, the utterance of this word is accompanied by similar strides forward.

And now Beta makes the final statement of the game. I have been always struck by the rather overt hostility seemingly embedded in this phrase. The game seems to be played in such good spirits, generally, that such a strong statement as the one I am about to reveal to you seems quite out of context. I would recommend, were anyone interested, an in-depth study of this phenomenon and related effect.

At any rate, the final statement as made by Beta is, to wit, "Show us some, if you're not afraid!"

A bit aggressive, think you not? A conceptual gauntlet thrown.

Now, we must leave the text of the game, as the actual textual portion of it has been exhausted.

And now, to the physical manifestation:

At this point in the game, Alpha and Beta are approximately one arm's length apart (the actual distance varying according to arm size, finger-length, glovedness, preparation charges, and taxes where applicable). Precisely at the moment at which this distance is reached—it being accomplished upon Beta's final foray, accompanied by that mystifying statement, which still irks me, "Show us some, if you're not afraid"—the Alpha team commences to pantomime the chosen profession—that being the one determined upon at the beginning of the game, as you doubtless recall. They pantomime individually, in small groups, or as a whole, simultaneously.

As they are doing so, members of the Beta team call out the names of various professions which, according to their individual and collective judgment, would be pursued in the manner that is being pantomimed before them by Alpha.

As soon as any member of the Beta team voices, correctly, the profession that has been agreed upon and is being performed by Alpha—that is to say,

at the moment that any member of the Alpha team hears from any member of the Beta team, the correct profession—the Alpha team turns about and sprints with great alacrity toward their base line. As soon as they begin to run, the Beta team takes this as evidence that someone has guessed correctly, whereupon the Beta team commences hot pursuit, their objective being to tag, by causing touchage anywhere upon the person of a member of the opposite team, before said member, or any member of said member, has traversed the demarcation line of that team's safe zone.

After issues are resolved, all those from the Alpha team who have acknowledged their condition of taggedhood join the Beta team, whereupon the Beta team convenes, in their own safe area, to select the next profession.

Now that we have the gist of the game of lemonade, I'm sure you recognize that I did not go to such lengths in my description of this childish pastime merely for the purpose of entertainment. No, my good colleagues, you certainly are familiar enough with my methodology by now to know that I had, as they say, an anterior motive. It is what this game illustrates that is of real significance. Unless, of course, we were engaged in playing it, in which case the significance would be of little or no import. But, as I'm sure you know, we're not.

Upon closer examination, we can see that the verbal exchange engaged upon betwixt the twain, is, in fact, of dubious value as to its function in the pursuit of the well-played game. It might also be rightly conjectured that the pantomime process is itself of little import. The actual game, the moment of play for which all the players have truly joyous anticipation is, in fact, neither the chanting nor the pantomiming, but rather the ensuing pursuit.

One may say, I think, with some impunity, that the entire lemonade portion of the game is merely a prelude to a game of tag.

And now, back to the subject of my lecture, that is, "The Analysis of the Value of the Prelude as a Factor in the Pursuit of a Well-Played Game," I conclude from the above:

It makes it funner.

Silliness

I was having fun being silly like this. My pseudo professorship was like a prelude—a way of savoring. It was fun taking so long to say what I could have said in perhaps less than a hundred words.

But, now, I have to figure out a way to let you know that I'm not, at least, trying to be silly anymore.

Silliness is a hard thing to get out of. It takes a direct communication. Something like: Look, I'm being serious now. OK, my silliness has been set aside for a while.

The prelude is over. You guessed the pantomime. Now, it's time for me to run back to the safe area, to get out of the game, to say something directly.

I was willing to be silly with you because I thought that by this time we had established enough familiarity so that one wrong move, one piece of nonsense, wouldn't end our ability to be together but rather would serve to increase our options.

There are probably as many preludes as there are things we enjoy doing together. We like the chance to savor, to anticipate. We like wrapping presents. We like doing things that are unnecessary, like being silly, like playing, like looking for a well-played game.

Sometimes, what we most need to be doing together is something downright silly—a jaunt, a flaunt, a ridiculous ludicrosity.

After all, we would be at least etymologically appropriate were we to seek out the ludicrous. You know, stemming from the word *ludus*, which is Latin for "play" or "game."

A silly game has its own kind of high. It is as important to us as a way to play as seriousness is. It is as life-giving, as renewing as the highest of our high aspirations.

As a matter of fact, we, as a play community, would not have the freedom to play as well as we do if we ever took anything—our game, our community—too seriously. We need the humor. We need the foolishness. Our play community could never feel as important to us as it does if we ever thought it was really so terribly important.

We like playing the fool—sometimes. We feel easiest about it when we're playing with babies. Then we can giggle and make faces and tickle and crawl. Then we can talk nonsense and semisense and common sense. We feel good about ourselves, about the baby, about what we're doing together. It seems to us that we're doing it well together—because we laugh the way we do, because we share the love and the freedom that it means.

It's not so easy to be silly with adults.

Sometimes, you're afraid of what others will think of you. You're afraid that what you intend to be silly will be taken seriously. Maybe someone will

think that you're avoiding reality. Maybe someone will feel that you're not taking him seriously enough. Maybe you are. Maybe you aren't.

We have to be very sensitive to each other in order to be silly together. It can get embarrassing. It can get confusing. It can happen at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. It can get out of hand.

If we really got silly, we could hurt each other. It happened to us when we were kids. There we were, being so silly that we got punished for it. We were throwing food. We were pushing each other off the diving board. We got hurt. We hurt each other. Someone else hurt us.

Serious things can happen when we get silly. We can get too silly.

It's a painful thing. You meant it for a joke. You didn't mean to hurt anyone by it. You didn't mean it to confuse anything. You thought we were all having fun. You thought we were all laughing at the same thing.

What a crash it is! What a letdown! To discover that we misunderstood the intention, that we hurt each other's feelings, that the other person didn't think it was funny at all.

We have to feel very safe with each other, very sure, in order to be really silly together. If you're worried about how I'm perceiving you, if you're not sure that we've established guarantees (whatever they are, whatever they have to be) which let us be serious when we have to be, need to be, want to be—then, how can we be silly?

How can we be sure of each other? How can we even hear each other if we don't know whether or not to take each other seriously? You want to understand the joke. You want to laugh with me. But how can you tell that I really meant it as a joke? How do you know that I'm not just putting you on? How can I prove it to you, now that you're not sure, that I wasn't joking?

There you were, being silly together, and you hurt her. All right, it was an accident, but you can't tell that she's really hurt. You think she might be faking—just being silly. So, you tickle her. You attack. You joke. And she can't even get through to you. She can't even let you know that she is, in fact, really hurt.

Being silly is just like any other play event in our community: It only works, it only brings us together in wellness if we are willing to play.

In order to be silly, I have to do whatever is needed to make it obvious to you that I am being silly, and to make it obvious to myself that I am not being too silly—that I am aware of you, of your needs, of your willingness to be silly with me.

Then we can all be silly. Then being silly restores us, completes us, enlarges us.

It is a good thing to be able to do together. But it takes familiarity and willingness in order for us to be able to do it well.

It's timing again. That's where the wellness is. It's the kind of thing that makes comedy comedy. It's sensitivity, responsiveness. It's having the sense to know when it's over, when it's time for a new silliness or a new seriousness.

Clarity. Clarity. We can't play unless we are clear that that's what we're doing. We can't be silly or even serious unless we know, clearly, that that's what we're being, that that's what we want to be.

So, we get slightly silly, we do things that are mildly ludicrous. We play games like Thar's a bar or zap, zorch, boing, perfigliano. Maybe we even try to combine the two. But we are careful, caring, always ready to accept and respond to the real needs of anyone in the community.

As we establish this freedom, as we come to recognize how fully silly we can be together, we have restored to our community yet another freedom. We have yet another resource which will help us maintain the balance that will keep things from getting too serious, keep our games from getting in the way of what we want to be doing together.

Doing Nothing

And here's yet another freedom that helps us maintain the sense of play and the experience of community—the opportunity to do nothing.

We need to be able to let everything, even the search for the well-played game, stop. We need to be able even to stop being a community.

We know. We remind ourselves: We can't play well if we're not willing to. We remember that the play community is itself only a *play* community. It isn't so real. It isn't so binding. It isn't forever. It, too, like the games we play in, will reach a high, a moment of wellness, which, in fact, could end it.

We need to be able to consider that option—even if we never take it. Doing nothing. Sitting around. Not playing. Not working. Not even looking at each other. Not even thinking about anything in particular at all.

Our ability to find a game we can play well in is directly related to our willingness to do nothing at all. We know that we don't have to. We don't

have to now. We're not looking for anything. Later, maybe, we'll want to do something together.

Having the freedom to do nothing gives us the opportunity to reaffirm our willingness to play together.

Maybe the reason we didn't play as well as we wanted to had nothing at all to do with the game itself, or with us even, but rather had to do with the fact that what we could do best with each other, at that particular moment, was nothing at all. That sometimes nothing is, in fact, the best thing to do. That sometimes nothing is the only thing we can do together.

8 People, Places, Things

All right, and yes, even. It's different when you have to invest money. We've established every freedom we need in order to play well together. We know we can be silly when we want to, serious when we have to. We even know that we don't have to do or be anything at all.

But it's different when you have to spend money for it.

Even if you are only buying a game. It's hard to take back. After all, that's how games are sold. That's how money is made. You buy it, and, baby, it's yours forever.

It's a necessary investment, sometimes. Even if it's expensive. If it will be a new invitation to play, it's worth it.

But watch out. An investment of actual money does strange things to people.

I go to the best game store in town to get us a game that is going to be a real knockout—a game that, as soon as you see it, you'll want to play it forever—a fantastic game!

Seventeen dollars?! For this!?! That's crazy!!!! It's the packaging you're charging me for, not the game! Why, I could make this game for nothing if I really wanted to. But it is attractive, and I know how much everybody will enjoy it, and, well, all right. Just give me a receipt. And look, it could be just the thing.

And you know what I do? When I get home, I set it up, and then I put it in an inconspicuous place. I want to be subtle about the whole thing. I want to see your faces when you discover it.

Carefully, I take all the pieces apart, making sure not a particle extra of the plastic thing that holds them together is visible. I sand the edges. Ah, smooth, perfect.

It's really fun anticipating what's going to happen. I call you up. Come over, I say, blithely, and let's play a game together. Actually, I've a little surprise for everyone.

And what I do, just for the drama of it all, is bring out one of my oldest, crummiest games. I've got this really ratty set of Monopoly. Most of the pieces are missing. The money is crinkled and smushed. The little cardboard sections for holding the pieces together are broken. The box is torn. The board is in two sections. So what I do is set it up right in the middle of the living room, right where everybody will think that this is the surprise I was talking about. Won't it be wonderful when you find the real surprise!

And then you come in, and you know what you do? You say, "Monopoly! What a great idea! We haven't played Monopoly in years. And this set! Why, it's so cute, so camp. Oh, Bernie, you're a genius!"

Why, I say, thank you. Yes, yes, I admit to the brilliance of it all. A result of a well-spent childhood, you know.

Here, here, I say, look what I seem to have found over here in this little-noticed section of my living room. Why, it's the famous game of Snorque! My goodness me, I had forgotten all about that. And I had just purchased it. Imagine that, here I am, possessing this most wonderful of all games, and I forgot that I had it. Why, look at the wonderful condition of it. Look at how well it has been carefully set up. Feel the veritable perfection of the pieces.

Oh, Snorque, you say, yes, we've heard about that. Probably a good game. Come on, Bern, don't you want to play Monopoly?

Now, look here, I say, all well and good for Monopoly. But Snorque! Well, what can I say? Snorque has won the prize. It is the international game of the eon. Surely we should at least try playing it? No, no, not just *try*, say I, but actually give it our all, if you know what I mean. Let us invest ourselves totally into this new wonder.

It doesn't seem fair, really. It doesn't seem fair that everyone isn't in love with my new game. It doesn't seem fair that I had to pay seventeen dollars just to find out that everyone would prefer playing my ratty old game of Monopoly.

It's a problem. Once, we tried playing in a toy store. We thought that then we could really tell what kinds of games we should invest in. We were thrown out. As we left, we said in our most profoundly mistreated-sounding

voices, "How are we supposed to buy a game if we can't play it enough to tell we're going to like it?"

And the store manager, backed by thousands of years of convention, responded, "This ain't no game room."

Which did bring to mind an alternative, after all. We could find a game room somewhere. So we look.

Well, there's the chess club—but all they play there is chess. There's the bowling alley. Same thing. So, how about the penny arcade?

First of all, there's no such thing anymore, there are only quarter arcades. Second of all, because of what we want to do together, it's not a good place for us. There seems to be a pallor over everything—a seriousness. There's not room to play anything else. We couldn't get into a game of hug tag. And it's crowded. We can't even do anything without feeling that we're doing something wrong.

No, I'm not saying that an arcade is a bad place. It's just not the right place for us. It's hard to feel our community there. All the people seem off on their own things. And there's a silence in the midst of all that noise like that in a pornographic book store.

And there aren't enough kinds of games. We need more choices. We need to be able to play a quiet game of chess if we want to. Or to dance.

All right, there are game rooms in the community center. We could go there.

Yes, there are fewer games of any one kind—but more kinds of games to choose from, actually. But everything seems abused. The pool table is off balance, the cloth scratched. There are pieces missing from the domino set. If we want to run around, we have to go over to the gym, and we don't want to be that separate—we want it to be easier for us to find a game together if we want.

Music's too loud in the bar. It's too dark. Maybe we should go to a movie after all.

Actually, the problem is that our play community is unique, that the concept which holds us together isn't available commercially. There is, in fact, no place for us.

In other words, we're going to have to create that, too. Now that we've found what we want to be doing together, now that we want to find a place that lets us do it as well as we know we can, we realize that we're going to have to make that place, too.

The Games Preserve

Well, my friends, let me tell you about something that I, your friendly conceptualizer, have conceived of, have actually built, right in my very own home. I call it a Games Preserve.

What, you ask, is a Games Preserve? Well, I respond, let me show you one, one that I built, one which at this time, unfortunately, is unique, but which is nevertheless to the point.

First of all, I live on a farm. Most of the games are in the barn. The house. The kitchen. The places to sit around. The fields. The woods.

So sit down, have a cup of tea or something, and, when you're ready, we'll all go up to the barn.

Well, here it is. Looks like a barn from the outside, doesn't it. That's one of the things I like about it—it's a surprise, unexpected, if you know what I mean.

Through this little green door. Wait until I turn on the lights. Ready? Here goes! Welcome to your very own play-community games preserve place.

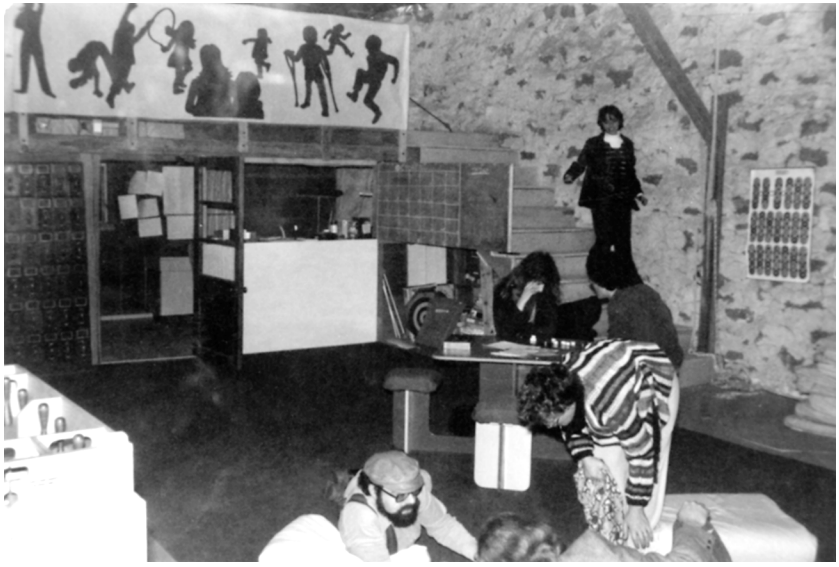

Figure 8.1
Games Preserve (ca. 1977), Bernie DeKoven (center, bottom) teaching board game, wife Rocky descending stairs

And revealed unto you is what I humbly consider to be a true marvel.

Here's a big carpeted area for dancing and big games and whatnot. Or I could let the rings down if anybody needed to fly a little.

Over there is a puzzle wall. All different kinds of puzzles—picture puzzles, puzzles that you have to take apart, puzzles that you try to put together, ancient puzzles, new puzzles.

And in here and up there we have the quiet games areas. Yes, it represents a veritable fortune in games. There about two hundred different ones here. Upstairs there are yet more hundreds. Strategy games. Games with dice. Simulation games. War games. Well, you never can tell what people are going to want to get into.

Oh, yes, that's the pool table. That's the Ping-Pong table next to the pinball machine where we invented Ping-Pong pinball. And those turning tables? They're for strategy games so people can practice taking both sides. And there are a few hundred more games over there.

Did I mention the air hockey table (complete with black light), the flying rings, the two musical sculptures on loan from a local artist named Harry Bertoia, the one, entire, forty-foot-long wall, a chalkboard, for, what else, chalkboard games?

A bit extreme, perhaps. Somewhat of an over-investment which has displayed a marked propensity for keeping us close to poverty ever since we began collecting the games. But what a place!

This is a toy library and an arcade and a gym and a chess club and a place to dance and whatever else you want it to be all, all under one proverbial roof.

This is the place where anybody can find a game, so that, if we want to play, if we only want to play, we'll be able to find something we'd want to play with right here. Take any couple or group, somewhere there's a game that everybody would have fun playing together. It's as guaranteed as we could make it.

I'd like to point out, if you don't mind, how remarkably well cared for these games are. Nary a piece is missing. I have made it a practice, and I'd appreciate it if you would, too, to put back each game after playing with it in such a manner as to retain that remarkably cared-for effect that I have so long labored to make herein manifest.

Yes, it is caring that has made this place such a good one to play in. Not just the caring for the games, but the caring for each other that we are able

to exercise here: What game do *you* want to play? Say, is there a game that everybody can play? Wait a minute, let me raise the rings before you start the game—somebody might bump into them. I really liked this game, want to see how it's played?

That's another thing I like about this place, the caring that has made it last.

And when you get out of the barn, if you want, maybe you'll take a walk in the woods, or go lie down in a field. Maybe you'll want to stop playing. Maybe you'll want to build something. We could make a tree house! We could just move these sticks and rocks around and make a maze, or a fort, or a good place to rest.

Or maybe you'll want to come back down to the house. The house is part of it, too. The welcome that you find here is not just mine. It's my family's. It's in the way that the pots are hung so anybody can use them, and our children's pictures are on the wall, and there's a toy that somebody made. It's in my children's genuine desire to play with you. It's in my wife's comforting comfort. In the way she has played here—painting the refrigerator and the kitchen clock and making a rainbow around the front door. It's the welcome.

It's a little embarrassing to find myself talking about this place as if it were the greatest accomplishment of the willingness to play. Actually, it isn't at all. My greatest accomplishment has been in the constant reaffirmation of our willingness to live together and share what we have, me and my wife and my children. The Games Preserve was something we built together. But what we have found together has been each other, and now, you.

This, really, is the discovery that leads us into creating play communities. It's not the games we're here for.

But still, still, we'd like to have places to play in. The idea of making a games preserve is a good one. It worked for us, for those who came to it, for the other people who helped us build it. But it doesn't have to be on a farm. It could be in a classroom, in a hospital corridor, in a community center. And we don't need every kind of game. And we probably wouldn't even have to spend a lot of money. We could make some of the games. We could ask our friends to ask everybody they know to ask everybody in the world for unwanted games.

As long as it's a place that's cared for, a place where there are people who care. As long as it's built and created and changed to help us be a play community. As long as it becomes the way we want it to become.

That means that we have to be able to move things around—to change things so that they can be the way we happen to want them to be at this particular moment. Maybe we could trade games we don't play for different games from some other games preserve. How about the one in the UN? I bet they've got some games we've never heard of before. How about the one in the IBM building. Or the games preserve in the senior citizen's center.

Ah, yes, the global view. A games preserve in every garage.

Think about it. A games preserve in your very own garage, where, every now and then, your whole family just plays. After dinner, maybe, after everything's put away. Imagine what it would be like having this place where all the games and toys and stuff you like playing with—the games the kids like, the games the adults like, the games the whole family likes—are all there, ready to be played with. And your whole family is there, playing together—creating, for the short time, a play community, in the special space you built together just so this could happen. And when your friends come over, they, too, become part of a play community, and they, too, build games preserves, and never, never do you ever again have the experience of, when you want to play, having no place to go.

And think of what would happen at work, when, just for an hour maybe, or after work even, you meet each other in the games preserve. Just for that short time, after having spent the day doing whatever it is that you have to do to make a living, and doing it as well as possible, after that, you come into this place and play together. Think of the relief, the re-establishment of nothing more than your basic enjoyment of playing well together. Think of being silly. Of doing anything, without purpose, without motive. Think of the game of lemonade you could play.

And in the schools for our children, think of playing Thar's a bar with the kids and the teachers and the principals. Think about the educational validity of creating the ultimate play community.

And in the hospitals, when we are so far from wellness that we can barely exist with our bodies, think of how it would be if we found a games preserve there, too, where we could play however we were able to play, and find some way to celebrate the health that we still have, and, hopefully, the greater health we are returning to.

A games preserve where the handicapped and the old and the young and the unlabeled could all play together, with each other, in the same community.

And then, think about this: We don't really need a games preserve at all. It would be nice. It would be wonderful. It would be a fulfillment, a testimony to the value of playing well together, to the very basic need to play, to the fact that we are all, each of us, so willing that all we need to be given is the permission and safety to let it happen.

We can play anywhere. We don't need a special place. We can make one. We can make one everywhere.

We don't even need the games. We can always find something worth playing with. We can find a jungle gym in a tree. A volleyball net in a fence. All we have to do is get on either side and play across it.

The New Games Foundation

There was an organization called the New Games Foundation, founded in the early 70s by Stewart Brand, dedicated to helping people experience the power of the play community.

The people of the Foundation were taking the concept that this book is all about and helping to make it real.

Figure 8.2
New Games referee Lee Rush (center, rear) leads game of People Pass

The New Games Foundation was a real, working organization. Its purpose was to provide other real, working organizations who worked with real people not just with services, but with the skills and support that they needed to help yet others to create their play communities.

One of its activities was called the "New Games Tournament." A group of people would come together—a group that may number as many as ten thousand people—and they'd play games in what became an actual celebration of the willingness to play.

There was all sorts of stuff to play with: a giant tug-of-war rope, a ball that was six feet in diameter, painted to look like a globe, and was called, lovingly, an Earthball; parachutes, new things to play with, old things to play with, new games, old games. But there really wasn't so terribly much equipment. Like the Games Preserve, it wasn't built with things, but by and with the people who came to play.

The games they played were not of any particular convention. They were cooperative as well as competitive, strategic as well as sheer luck, exerting as well as quiet, for one or two or a thousand people.

The games were called "new" not because people had never played them before but because they were kept new by the ways in which they were played. Whatever rules there were, they were only the starting point, the introduction to the game. They described not how the game had to be played, but rather how the game *could* be played. People played the games the way they wanted them to be. That was the understanding that made the games "new."

It was a remarkable thing, watching this event unfold. We'd begin, for example, with a game that was remarkably like tag. Only it was "hug tag" because, in order to keep from being tagged, you had to be hugging someone else.

Most people had never played tag that way before. But they'd played other tag games, so they knew that they needed more information, such as how long they could stay hugged.

The people who were introducing the game (we called them "referees") would typically claim that they weren't really sure how to answer that question. They'd explain that they could describe the rules they played by last time, with the last group that played. But that there was no official rule for hug-length.

So, people would play and see what happened. If everybody was hugging all the time, which was nice for them, it just wasn't that much fun for the

person playing *it*. So, one of the New Games referees would say something like:

"How about if we say that you can't hug anyone that you've hugged before? Will that make it more fun for everyone?"

And people'd try that. And it worked. And that was the way they wanted to play it forever. And so it continued. A new game.

There were lots of other ways they could be playing the game. They could see what happened if they had to hug three people in order to keep from being tagged, or what would happen if they had to hug one more person each time, or if they were allowed to hug themselves, or if they had to play it with their eyes closed.

So, however it got played, it was the way the players wanted to play it. It became their game. And because it was their game, it was new. It had never been their game before. It had never been played just that way. It will probably never again be played like that. But it remained their game, forever.

And what amazed people most about all this newness was that it was also very familiar. They'd played like that before. There was a time when every game they played was new, because they had the freedom to change the game into something they happened to be enjoying at the time. What was new was the renewal of the play community.

The New Games Tournament was itself new.

Most people had never experienced being part of such a large play community. There were thousands of people playing—children, adults, senior citizens, abled, differently abled. There were people that you might have lived with all your life and never seen before, and you'd meet them in a hug. There were professionals and amateurs, gang members and police officials, and, for the first time, they were all playing together, all part of the same community, but never like this, never in this gentle an embrace.

There were games everywhere—all kinds of games for all kinds of people. There'd be music and food, dancing and juggling. There'd be a mural to paint, a song to learn, masks to make, puppets to play with. We were doubly, triply, a hundredfold empowered to find what it was we could play well together. And then we'd find that we could play well together with everyone!

It was a mass initiation into the power available to us when we were willing, merely willing, to play well together. It was a re-introduction to the heart of play, an invitation to health on every level, in every manifestation.

We'd look around and discover an experience of profound familiarity—with the spirit, with the people who manifest that spirit. The energy, the vitality was everywhere. The potential, actual. In all that strangeness, we discovered that none of us were strangers. We all liked to play. There was nothing—age, ability, profession, language, status, nationality—that could separate us any longer. We had left everything else behind, and we were all just playing.

No, the New Games Foundation wasn't the only organization that dedicated itself to the renewal of play. Kids, for example. They know a lot about playing. They'll even let you play with them. Then there are people like Brian Sutton-Smith, who has studied play from the anthropological and psychological perspective and has written voluminously about it and also was one of the finest capture-the-flag players I have ever had the honor to experience play with.

Then there's Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who wrote a book called *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975), which is a frame-breaking study of what people enjoy about enjoying themselves.

And Iona and Peter Opie who have collected children's games for years—real collecting, by watching children play, by playing with them—and have come up with a remarkably accurate description, not only of the games, but the various dynamics of children's play communities, and have collected all that into a masterful book called *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Clarendon Press, 1970).

The point is, the time is whenever you're willing to make it happen, the place is anywhere you want it to be, and there are people, all over the world, who can help you get it together, together.

9 Playing for Keeps

So we know what it is that we're trying to do, we know what it feels like when we do it, and we know that we can make it happen and that there are others who can help us make it work.

We've become extremely clear, extremely confident about the value and practicability and joy of pursuing the well-played game. And now we want to go further than that. We want to see what else we can play with. We want to see if we can play for keeps, and still play.

I'd like to think, just for the sake of the poetry of it, that the reason anyone plays for keeps is in order to keep playing. I'd like to base my entire view of this phenomenon of playing for keeps on the hypothesis that it is a tragicomic act of those who pursue the ephemeral in the hopes of making it permanent.

Unfortunately, all that we can make permanent is the pursuit.

Because, see, when someone plays for keeps, he's not just playing. He plays for keeps because he thinks it's a great way to earn a living. And he's good at the game. Good enough to stay ahead.

Staying ahead. That means getting more out of it than he has to put into it. Not a very ecological view of the whole process, but, man, what a nice thing to have happen.

He is probably aware that his staying ahead means that someone else has to stay behind. He can see the picture clearly enough—lose a few, win a few more.

The Con Game

So, all right, he says, let's start with a little game of marbles. Tell ya what I'm gonna do.

This here is my own special marble game. Look at 'em closely if you will. Some of the holes are bigger, some smaller. Smaller ones get a bigger payoff, if you get my meaning.

Now, this is what you have to do. Roll your marble into this hole, from standing over there, and I'll give you five marbles back. Roll it into this hole, and I keep your marble. Miss the target entirely, and, tell ya what I'm gonna do, I'll give you another chance, absolutely free of charge.

All right, lemme be perfectly honest and open with you, my good friends, it's hard to get it into the five-marble hole. You can take that as a universal truth, if you want. See, I made it that way. Chances are, you won't be able to do it. But you might. You just might. And then I'll give you back five marbles for every one you roll in. Contemplate those riches, eh?

Think it can't be done? Think it's too hard? All right, just to show you fair's fair, I'll demonstrate. Anyone want to bet me five marbles? No? Well, all right, all right, I'll do it anyway.

Check me out, please. I am standing at this line. I am now kneeling. This is what I call my standard kneel. I also have the left-knee kneel, like so, and the right-knee kneel, like so. You may use any or all, whatever suits your style.

I have placed my pointing finger down on the line, so that the nail touches. This is the proper position precisely. The marble rests lightly between my thumbkin and my pointer, and I shoot, thusly.

Is it going to go in? Yes, it does, my friends. He does it, indeed he does it!

Now, who among you would care to give this a few rolls?

The game, as a matter of fact, is absolutely fair. He's not keeping anything from anybody. He's merely capitalizing on his ability to play well.

It is true that his willingness to play this particular game hinges not so much on his pursuit of the well-played game as it does on his belief in your lack of ability to do as well as he.

And now I see, my friendly folk, that you're getting a little tired of this game. I happen to have with me a rather intriguing variant of the famous old shell game.

Now, before you get into it, let me tell you that the hand is quicker than the eye, and my cheating ability is quicker than that, even. Yes, that's right, my friends and contemporaries, members of my peer community,

my colleagues everywhere, I'll admit to you that I'm cheating. But, I'll add something to the game in your favor—just to sweeten the pot, if you know what I mean. If anybody, if any one of you fine and trustworthy, loyal and true people out there can catch me cheating—that's right, if you can tell me what I did with that little old ever-elusive pea—I'll give you half of what I win in the game. A mere dollar will let you investigate as closely as you wish.

This phenomenon of playing for keeps is also known as gambling. The generic name for gambling games as played on the fairground is "The Con Game." The participants in such games are the various assorted suckers who have come to experience a profound licking. A "sucker" being one who gets so invested that he doesn't know when to quit.

It's difficult, at first, to think of con games as a possible choice for our play community.

But, once we do take them into the community, they aren't really con games anymore. No one is getting conned into doing anything. It becomes another invitation to play.

There's a certain kind of conning that we enjoy, all of us, that results in everyone feeling that what has happened between them has been well played.

I also happen to be involved in a spiritual play community. It was my friend and teacher and playmate, Reb Zalman Schachter, who first pointed me to seeing the delight of the well-struck bargain.

The Well-Struck Bargain

When two people are bargaining, the jug seller and the tourist, say, and they bicker and bicker over the price, when they finally settle, when they finally agree, this is what happens: First, they both look robbed. Then, they each give the other a sign of final begrudging, and then they both walk away, *each of them thinking: I got the better deal.*

Look at my bargain, dear. Can you believe it? Why, I had to haggle with that foreign woman for literally hours. Aren't you terribly proud of me that I was able to purchase this genuine example of native art for such a pittance?

Hello, dear. Well, we're in the money again. Yeah, I sold this tourist that vase we've been trying to get rid of. He loved it. We've got enough now to go to a genuine American five-and-dime store and get us some real plastic.

The fact is, they both got a good deal. They both got what they wanted—more than they thought they could get. Thus, they both experienced the bargain as being well-struck. And, as a matter of fact, it was.

We can experience excellence as we try to drive a bargain as hard as we possibly can. We can also experience this as a moment of really fine play.

When I know that you are out to get the most out of me you can, and when you know that I'm out to get the most out of you that I can, we can sense the play, the strategies and counterstrategies, the maneuvers, the tactics, and the humor that surrounds all of it. Yes, we are playing for keeps. But, strange as it is to acknowledge, if the tourist paid the jug seller's first price, the jug seller, though having made a great deal more money than she had ever hoped to make, would still feel somehow disappointed. She thought you were going to bargain with her. She feels that it was unfair. That her price was never what she said it to be. That you never gave her a chance to bicker. She'd think less of you. She'd think less of herself. Ah, the American fool, he just doesn't appreciate the fineness of bargaining, the subtlety of it all, the quality of the game.

Poker

For our play community, at this time, with each other, we decide that poker might turn out to be a game we can play well together.

This is another one of your amazing feats of play. It brings in something that is almost too real to play with. It's not marbles, baby, it's bread, it's the very staff of life we're pokering around with.

Sure, it can get dangerous. Playing for a prize is hard enough. A plastic trophy is only a decoration. But playing for money, for keeps, that's another thing entirely.

But it doesn't have to keep us from playing at all. We can make arrangements. We can play for pennies. We can pay enough attention to each other to make sure that everybody in the game can afford to lose. We'll make sure that no one has to play. We'll serve beer.

I've seen some fine games played around a poker table. I've seen us even able to be a little silly with it. A lot silly, in fact. Ever see a game of Indian poker?

Well, the way it starts is that everybody takes a card and holds it on his/her forehead so that everybody else can see what's on the card except the one on whose forehead the said card is being held. Are you going to tell me that's not silly?

Being in this position, we find ourselves in a rather intriguing dilemma. I know everybody else's card but my own. The only clue I can find is a poorly masked guffaw that occurs when I raise the ante further than I should, considering what card is on my forehead. It is a marvelous confidence game since none of us have anything at all that we can be confident about except the willingness to play such a ridiculous game.

And there's that manifestation of mystifying countenance known as "the poker face"—an intricate self-mastery requiring total equanimity and acceptance of the various prickles of fate. It allows us to play with something that is, in fact, beyond our control. Play with it, and even bet on it.

And so, we go on to another game of poker. It's dealer's choice, you know. The only thing we add to that is that we must all agree that this is, in fact, the variant that we all want to play. Sometimes we even make up the rules together. Sometimes, it gets unplayable.

Yes, it may be true that, by asking for three cards, you have somewhat interfered with your credibility, and that the rest of us will be likely to assume that you have in your hand something less than a powerhouse. However, there is still the chance that you drew from the deck exactly those three cards which you had the greatest need of.

The following excerpt is from my article, "Conversation with Cards" published in *Simulation/Gaming/News*[1] magazine.

> Five-card poker evolves a rather intriguing analogy. At the beginning of this voyage into fate, each player must "buy in" or "ante." Thus, the ship leaves the shore. A hand of five cards is dealt. Now, each captain must decide his initial course. He takes stock of his provisions. He must discover the most favorable wind.
>
> Which arrangement of his cards will be the most profitable? Which has the greatest potential? And, when he makes his decision, his very commitment to it is challenged. He must bet on his own powers. He must bet on his ability to discover even greater power across an uncharted sea.
>
> But even that is not enough. Others may increase the bet. Others may be forcing him to see that they may have a greater chance than he to succeed. Should he go

back to shore before the distance is too great and the investment too heavy? Dare he raise even another sail?

At last the challenge is agreed upon. Those who have already met their fate return to a poorer shore. The others, the wise and overconfident, plunge forward. They trade whatever they feel they must risk to gain the riches of the new land. And now, the dream is almost realized, the course home already foretold.

And now they must challenge each other's victories. There is no more wind. The sea is behind us. Now, let us determine who has the greatest faith in his success.

We bid again. We bid to convince. We underestimate for a while, engage in small comparisons. But then, suddenly, we are dared to the showdown. It becomes a duel of confidence between two players. The others have given up all claim. And then, when the bid is finally agreed upon, when the last volley has been fired, the merchandise, the fact of power, the deepest wound, is once and for all revealed. And to the victor belongs the spoils.

Everything the victor has risked is returned to him, along with everything everybody else has risked. Thus, the size of the victory is directly contingent upon the amount each player can get the others to risk. What is recovered on the shores of the metaphor is not the riches of a new land, but the penalties exacted of those who are less fortunate, of the meek and the foolhardy.

Poker is the archetypical confidence game. It is a contest of claims, a battle of bravado, a showdown between the rich and the clever. The opportunity for deception is augmented by the use of symbolic money—those little chips which breathe an air of playful innocence, until they are cashed in.

Playing for keeps means that when the game is over there will be real consequences in real life. To do it well, to play this kind of game well, it is essential to the community that the balance between the game and its consequences be maintained.

To do this, we must first become sensitive to what, in fact, we are playing with. Our prime directive is to play well with each other. This directive takes precedence over anything else. Then we are *playing* with chance.

Our success in playing well with chance is contingent upon an understanding of probability. Chance is a very unreliable partner. We must know when chance is most likely to be in our favor. Thus, we generate guidelines for ourselves, such as "Never draw on an inside straight." Because we understand the probability of various possibilities, we know when we are taking a chance that is greater than our probability of success, so we bet lightly, we keep our investment as moderate as possible, we try to be clear enough so that we can make judgments that will result in our favor. If we sense that the chance is too great, we fold, we end our participation in that round of the game. In other words, we know that in poker we sometimes can quit with honor.

But it is never sure. That's what makes the game so interesting. Not only is there a possibility that, despite the odds against us, the chance we take will pay off. There is also the further possibility that, despite the apparent confidence of the players, this hand, which seems to be of markedly unimpressive value, might be, in fact, the best of all. My two kings might win the game for me. That's what confidence games are all about. They provide the opportunity and reward for your display of self as well as for your ability to play well with chance—they call for control over yourself as well as control over the game.

Self-control is the most pervasive theme of games with stakes. One must meet one's losses as well as one's gains with equanimity. It can be, in fact, a spiritual discipline. Most of the games American Indians played were gambling games. The rule was, even though you may have lost so much that you are walking away naked to an empty home, you must maintain your composure even at that very moment of total loss. No matter how much you lost, you have not lost your dignity. What is strong about you does not rest in what you own, but rather in your self-possession.

This is a lot to play with. It requires a tremendous amount of willingness to maintain all these various sensitivities, to exert this much control. What allows us to *play* such games is our full acknowledgment of their nature and ours. As long as we all know what we're playing with, we can play with anything. Yes, I will try to fool you if I can. It is, after all, a fair system. You, too, may try to fool me—if you can.

Hard Playing

There are two factors that disturb the balance of this game most severely. Because playing for keeps, no matter what you're playing, involves losing as well as winning, we must be extremely careful not to overinvest. You can't play if you can't afford to lose. If you lose too much, your hurt is too real. It stops a game that everyone else wanted to keep going. It keeps you from thinking about anything other than how you can possibly recover.

The second factor is even stronger in its impact on our willingness to continue playing the game: cheating.

If we had all agreed to letting each other cheat, then it'd be OK. We could play with that, too. There are games, for example, like the card game I doubt you, in which one has to cheat in order to play.

But we didn't make that kind of agreement. We said we could try to deceive, but not by downright cheating. And the kind of cheating is not your community-variety well-timed cheat. Rather, it's the kind of cheating, the old aces up the sleeves kind of cheating, that's solely for the cheater.

We'll play a game of chance with each other only under the condition that we each have the same chance. We'll even play with each other if we know from the start that "the house" has a better chance. We'll play roulette. We'll even play the slot machine. Who knows, we just might win. But, see, we have to come into the game knowing. We have to know ahead of time. Then we're OK. But when you cheat, man, that's something else. It's just not right. Because now, all of a sudden, we find out that we're in a game that's stacked against us. Now that the game is going, now that we've bet as much as we did, we don't want anybody to change the game on us, no sir, no sireebobcat.

It is very difficult for us to regain our community once we discover that someone has cheated. We have to establish trust all over again. We have to create an even more certain understanding. Thus, the outrage of our entire community is leveled against the cheater. He has not only broken the game, he has broken the trust of our community. He wasn't looking to play well. His only intention was to make money.

When we are playing this close to reality, when we are playing for keeps, we are almost on the brink. The consequences of playing well are extremely empowering. Not only do we get money, but we transcend money—slightly, to the degree in which we can afford to. We are playing with necessity and hence slightly in control over something which usually controls us. It can offer us a perspective, playing with chance, that can actually lighten the seriousness of the outside world. We are playing with consequences, and yet we discover that even then we care more about the people playing than we do about making money. Sure, we stand the risk. We win a few, we lose a few. But it doesn't matter that much. Winning and losing are not that much in our control. It's luck. Sure, there's skill, but look, this is a friendly game we're talking about. Nobody's trying to get rich. No one's here to take advantage of anything other than the opportunity we provide each other for playing well together.

On the other hand, we're close, we're very close to something else. The game could become other than what we intended it to be. And it would

have consequences. It does have consequences. If someone cheated, it could destroy the whole community.

If it works, the community is stronger for it. We can play dangerously and still play well. If it works, we can play with more. We can be safe even though we're playing with things that we can't play with anywhere else. We can play with serious things—things of consequence. We could play with silence, with fasting, with patience. We could play with anger, with fear. There's an organization called Project Adventure.[2] Their whole emphasis is on playing with things that are slightly dangerous so that people can discover the safety that lies within the community. We can climb mountains, we can get as dangerous as we want, because we know that we are strong enough to be safe even then. Because we play responsibly, because we have affirmed our responsibilities to each other, to the sense of wellness, we can become larger than necessity. We can discover a new freedom.

Dangerous Play

So we play with danger. A little danger. Enough danger. It is thrilling beyond words, this ability to play well with survival—to include in our games the very things that we have never been able to play with before. We can even play with death.

We can do this as long as we maintain our balance, as long as we are fully aware of the consequences, and fully accepting of them. But, as our games get dangerous, our community has yet another obligation—we must make doubly sure that everyone we are playing with knows the consequences, has chosen to play.

Our dangerous games can't involve those who haven't accepted the threat, who haven't chosen to play with us. We can't play dangerously with someone who isn't playing. It isn't play.

This is a very big accomplishment, being able to play with danger. It is only play, I repeat, if *all* those involved are playing.

Thus, we can even play war. It has been done. With real weapons!

Yes, I recognize this is an extreme. But even in this extreme, as long as we're playing with those who wish to play with us, who are fully aware that the consequences aren't play, that you can die playing, we can play well. It is weird, though, that we want to play that hard.

But it has been done. It has been achieved by some tribes, this playing war. There are gradations of consequences. We can play a soft war (This is Stewart Brand's idea, [3] which, in fact, led to the formation of the New Games Foundation—the idea that, if we can play with styrofoam swords in a safe place, we can play safely with something we need to play with. He is quoted as saying: "humans must have a need for war since they do so much of it."), which results in no one getting hurt. We can play a real war. We can joust. We can duel. As long as we keep our weapons pointed at each other.

No one, as yet, has managed to play in what we call a modern war. There are some who feel as though they are playing, but there are others, at the other end of the missiles and bombs, who would, if they could, like to be left out of the game.

So this is another lesson, another piece of grand wisdom about the nature of a play community: We can play with anything as long as we are playing with those who know the consequences, who have chosen to play with us. As we play dangerously, we are all in danger. The consequences of playing poorly may be hazardous to our health.

For Higher Stakes

Danger is a hard thing to play with. There are other things, with as significant consequences.

The spiritual play community plays for different stakes. We create it because it provides us with a glimpse of other, more profound realities. I call it a play community because we are as bound to our mutual objective of playing well together as we are to what we are playing with. Wherever we are going, whatever truth we are trying to find the other side of, we want to get there to see it together.

I must qualify it even further. The community is very loose. Some of its members have never met each other. But all of us, no matter who's playing with whom, enjoy playing for spiritual stakes—a moment of shared enlightenment, a vision of truth, a supernatural joy.

We play very strange games together. We might spend two hours doing nothing but breathing together. We might study a leaf. We might follow a wind. We are playing for very high stakes, and, when we reach the real payoff, we reach it together, discovering that we had, in fact, lost everything

but each other, and that now for this moment there is simply nothing to lose.

It isn't accurate, actually, to call this play community spiritual any more than it is to say that because we're playing poker our play community is a gambling play community. It is merely the fact that in one play community we play for money, and in the other we play for meaning.

We could play poker in both communities. In one, if you win, you get power. In the other, if you win, you get understanding. It is good to have at least a couple of communities to play in.

The nature of playing for meaning, since it is an act of our play community, is such that most prizes are shared. In other words, if, because of the way we've played together, you've won a particular insight into the nature of the universal will, you will share it with us to the best of your ability. You don't do this out of a sense of obligation to the community. You do it because it enriches all of us.

The rules for playing for meaning are remarkably similar to those for playing for money. There must be openness, a shared awareness of positive and negative consequences, and a transcendent community goal of playing well together. As soon as the experience of excellence no longer resides in the way we are playing the game but is given over to a consideration of what will happen if we win, the game becomes inappropriate. We are no longer playing.

If the goal of our playing is not the game but rather is playing well, we can play for any stakes.

The stakes serve merely to make the game more interesting. That is, when it is useful for us to play for keeps, it is useful only insofar as it is helping us create a well-played game. If playing for stakes provides us with the focus we need, it is useful. It is like playing for score.

Thus, as we play for meaning, we must be more willing to play than we are desirous of becoming meaningful. When it becomes appropriate, we will play absurdly. We will play pointlessly, without consequence. We'll dance. We'll hug each other. Without meaning.

To do this, we must be clear with each other. We must all know that this game we're playing is not for meaning. This game is.

It is a difficult balance to maintain. This is a hug of exuberance. This is a hug of acknowledgment. This is a transcendent hug—a universal hug. This is a play hug.

When we have this clarity, when it is always obvious to us what we are playing for, we can play for growth, wisdom, knowledge, truth, but always for the sake of playing.

We could be playing for educational stakes—to improve skills, to widen our access to knowledge. But, as crucial as it is to our survival in the real world to play for such goals, we must first acknowledge our community and our intention of playing well together. We are playing to learn. We are playing to learn because that particular challenge intrigues us. We begin playing and end playing with the knowledge that we are already worthy and good and wise. What we win is the opportunity to play with that knowledge, and, in so doing, to play well, and, in so playing, to discover that there is yet more for us to play with.

We can play for growth. For knowledge of the human condition. For therapy. We can play for release, for freedom. We can play for dignity, acceptance, tolerance. But, no matter what the stakes are, if we play for anything we can't afford to lose, we can no longer afford to play.

Notes

1. *Simulation/Gaming/News* was edited by Don Coombs, University of Idaho, and published from 1971 to 1977.

2. See http://www.pa.org/.

3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewart_Brand.

10 Playing to Win vs. Having to Win

And here's the crux of this study, the ultimate, the veritable pivot about which this book is completely hung:

There's a difference between playing to win and having to win.

When you're playing to win, you're judging your behavior in terms of how it helps you achieve the goal. You've accepted the game completely—that is, you are following a certain set of rules, working within them.

When you *have* to win, you're willing to break whatever rules you can if that would help you get closer to the goal. When you have to win, you're not concerned with fairness, feeling, the community, or even play. When you have to win you can't leave the game until you have finally, ultimately, won.

What's amazing to me about all this is that the game itself doesn't change. The rules and the conventions are the same. But the manner of playing the game is completely different. When you have to win, just as when you have to play, the game takes on too much reality—though it is still a game, it no longer feels like one.

When you have to win, you're not concerned with how well you're playing unless it happens to help your game. You've no way to evaluate what you're doing in the game other than by the score—your proximity to the goal.

Thus, you play with a three-year-old in the same way you would play with an adult. If the kid cheats, you'll be angry, insulted. If she loses, you'll feel good. You'll feel good that you beat a three-year-old. You've too much on the line, you're too exposed, too determined by the game.

Playing to Win

I think that playing to win is inherent in what most people experience as the well-played game. People who don't play to win have trouble maintaining

the sense of the game. Something happens that makes the game feel too loose to play well.

Playing to win can take on many different meanings, depending on what kind of win you're looking for. It can mean a collaborative as well as a competitive win.

Playing to win means merely that you've accepted the conditions of the game. You're playing to win the game, as stated, as agreed upon.

If you're not playing to win and I am, you invalidate what I'm doing. I feel cheated. I feel that you weren't really in the game like I thought you were. I feel embarrassed by trying so hard to do something against you when I discover that you weren't playing against me.

Without an agreement on what we're playing for, the game becomes painfully embarrassing.

There you are, hitting this little ball with a stick, trying to make it go straight. Obviously, if the object were to get the ball into a hole, the easiest way, the most logical way would be for you to pick up the ball, go over to the hole, and drop it in.

The fact that you're using the stick has something to do with your acceptance of the conditions within which you are going to participate in the game for the sake of playing well. If one of us isn't really committed to trying, then the other person's efforts suddenly seem foolish. Here I am, doing my best to get a really profound bank shot, and there you are, trying to make a pretty arrangement out of the rest of the balls.

Yes, we know that in the scale of things this game isn't as important as we are. Yes, we are playing this game together. But didn't we agree to compete?

Look, man, if you're just going to play around, why don't you find somebody else to play around with? Nothing against you, you know. It's just that I'm involved, see, in this effort, this real honest-to-goodness effort to get this ball to go where I want it to go. All I ask for is a little respect, and, if you wouldn't mind, would you keep your hands off the balls?!

This is yet another safety factor—the agreement that if we're playing to win, we're all playing to win. Playing to win is as absurd as anything else, but if it helps us play well together, if it helps us arrive at a well-played game, we have to know that we all take the effort seriously.

Having to Win

While teaching a graduate course at Trinity College, it was my intention to facilitate the formation of an educational play community—a play community the stakes of whose games was an understanding of the facilitation of social processes.

Before we could begin playing, we had to close the door. We were in an institution devoted to the serious pursuit of arming people to oppose the sea of troubles that besets them whenever they try to do anything in the real world. We were afraid that we would be misinterpreted, that someone, seeing how much fun we were having, would assume that we were not engaged in a worthwhile endeavor. We were concerned, legitimately, with our appearance.

The games, once the door was closed, could get silly. It was all right because, somehow, between each other, we had established the legitimacy of this conduct as being related to the achievement of the stakes for which we were playing. Being silly might pay off. It might result in an insight that would be of legitimate value. We could allow ourselves this much, but only if we had the door closed.

As a matter of fact, we were already beginning to see some payoff. We were exploring many of the same dynamics in pursuing silliness that we perceived taking place in the classroom. The parallels abound.

For example, we had to deal with establishing safety. How were we going to make sure that could each quit with honor? How easily could we accept each other's right to stay out of the game? The implications were immediate and profound. We found a way of describing, from genuinely shared personal experiences, the significance of providing children with the freedom to opt out. Is that something that we can allow to take place in an educational institution? What are the penalties and the advantages of such a freedom? How can we keep it from going too far? When does it ever go too far?

We were, in fact, playing very well together, and winning, with great and mutually acknowledged success.

But, of course, our door was closed.

Then we decided to explore how we would play in a more open environment. We were ready to raise the stakes. If we lost, we would be too embarrassed to continue playing. If we won, we would have secured for

each other a public justification for all our shenanigans. If we lost, it would be a severe loss. It would take a long time to recover. Not only would we have to meet behind closed doors, but also we would begin to question the respectability of the whole thing we were doing together. Maybe it was out of place. Maybe we shouldn't be playing in an institution of this import.

I don't think we could have ever gone outside if we hadn't already formed a strong base inside, in each other. I think our play community reached a point of confidence and solidarity from which it could test itself against the reality of the larger institution. I think we knew we were going to win.

One of the first things that became clear to us was that the games we would feel most comfortable playing out there on the quad, exposed like we would be, were those that had a perceivable goal. In other words, if we could make it as obvious as possible that we were indeed playing a game in which we were able to achieve something, then we'd appear legitimate.

This was a real need—a clear, intelligent response to our relationship to the school at large. We knew we had a sound educational objective. We also knew that the way we were going about pursuing that objective smacked of illegitimacy. No one could tell from watching us that we were generating knowledge. It looked like we were just playing around.

The point of all this, the learning we won, was the simple practicality of playing to win. It was essential to our maintaining our play community within this environment.

We had agreed that we would play until it was dark. We didn't want to have to be too conscious of time—it would restrict our freedom in the games. After all, if we had to make an arbitrary decision about what time we were to stop, and we had to assume the arbitrary authority to enforce that decision, we would have spent more time watching our watches than playing with each other—just that much time more. So we decided to let the sun settle it for us. Appropriate, no?

It was dark enough for us to acknowledge that this was the last game. There were just few enough people around to help us be willing to try a game with a less obvious win—a game that was, in fact, slightly silly.

It had been happening ever since we got outside. The games we were playing had an increasing tendency to be fun rather than intense. We were more focused on enjoying than we were on achieving—which was, in itself,

the achievement we had hoped to make. We had found the freedom to continue our community even though we were not in the classroom. We had sallied out of the womb and found that it was OK outside.

So we chose to play a game called, variously, "knots," "tangle," and "circle twine the garland." Games do that, you know—get called variously.

The game began with our holding hands in such a way as to entangle ourselves, and ended when we had freed ourselves from the tangle we created. A most appropriate game. A good metaphor even.

After a few minutes of play, we had reached the final knot. Unfortunately, this knot was of such proportions as to manifest severe untanglability.

I introduced the concept of the well-timed cheat, and, with the change of a mere four handholds, we were free.

We returned to the classroom, as per agreement.

In our discussion, George Sutherland and Peter Wiles began toying with the question of why we had cheated—well-timed though it may have been.

What we were exploring was whether or not we had reached a point in the development of our community at which, in order to experience the well-played game, we had to win.

Let me tell you, this was a very nice question to play with. What it showed us, plain and simple, was that we had not won as much as we thought we had. We weren't really as free to play as we wanted to be.

The realization helped us realize the community. We incorporated into our understanding yet another element of reality—yet another thing to play with: having to win versus playing to win.

The balance between these two is subtle and delicate—especially when we're playing for real stakes, for things we can't really afford to lose. If we can't afford to lose, if we have to win, we can't afford to play.

Take the new kid on the block who wants everybody to like him. He goes out to play baseball because that's where everybody else is. That's where he can prove himself likable. So they let him on the team. He thinks: Maybe if I can show everybody what a good player I am, what a nice person, what a cheerful fellow, maybe they'll accept me, maybe they'll want me to play with them. He picks up the bat. It is incredibly heavy. He can't afford to miss. He has to win. That's all there is to say.

But what about when you really have to win—when the game or the grade is all that's keeping you from wherever it is you want to be going, and you've got to make it?

It seems that if you have to win, since there are times when you do, it would be easier all around if you didn't think of yourself as playing. You might be able to play. That would be yet another win. Perhaps more meaningful. But, if winning is that important, winning is what you have to be—not playing.

It's like this when you *have* to win:

You say to yourself,

Self, I got to win. I got to do it. I win this game and I win everything. If I can show I'm good enough, if I can do something really great, they're really going to love me, that's what.

It's like this when you're *playing* to win:

You say to yourself,

Self, I got to win. I got to do it. I win this game and I win everything. If I can show I'm good enough, if I can do something really great, they're really going to love me, that's what.

While, at the same time, you also say to yourself,

Self, it's OK, you know. It's no big deal. It's only a game. They're going to love you any way they can, if they can. This is the game you've chosen to play in. Play in it. Find out how you can play in it. Take it easy. Enjoy it while it's here, because it isn't anywhere else.

When you want to win, you have one more point of reference, one more inner coach. You have a better balance. You can play as though you had to win because you've got the other voice to keep you even. You've got the gaming mind and the playing mind both in the same event.

When you have to win, there is only one coach, the driving one, the one that drives you to win at all costs, the one that tells you you're going to win even if you have to break yourself in order to do it. And that voice is echoed in every part of the game. And there is only the game to give you balance. You are so deeply into the game that there is no community you can share it with. You are alone, isolated, desperate.

What we call the "will to win" functions best only when there is a complementary willingness to accept loss. From that position we can affirm the game, we can focus on winning, we can call forth new strengths—not because we are driven to win but because we know that we don't have to.

This is the balance that maintains the community—the dialog between the gaming mind and the playing mind, between this and other games,

between these and other communities. What happens as a result of this dialog is that we are able to create the well-played game together. Because we see reality as the other half of the illusion, the stakes of the game become a way to enrich our very own lives. When we play well together, we have made an embellishment, a useless, spontaneous, joyous human decoration on the shape of necessity—a piece of junk art, a beautiful graffito.

And, interestingly enough, when we finally win, when we win everything, we look for other things to win. If we can't find them, we create them. Interestingly enough.

11 Completion

If the game is good enough, if it is close enough, it is unfinished. Even though we have already agreed that at such and such a time, under such and such conditions, it would be over regardless, we create yet another convention—overtime.

When a game goes overtime, it's because it can't be finished the way we want it to be unless we agree to change our plans. We want our game to end. We want it to have a clear, fitting conclusion. We want the game to be settled—even if, in order to do so, we have to push back reality for a few more minutes.

We need completion. We are willing to do anything we have to, even if it means changing our agreement, so that we can get it.

There are two thoughts here: completion and the changing agreement.

As significant as agreement is, as essential as it is to the creation of a well-played game, the need for completion is stronger.

It means that our agreements are conditional. They are not absolute. We can't arrange for everything ahead of time—there are circumstances, extraneous events, other interferences. There is that for which we can't plan.

Which means that our agreements are subject to yet other agreements—agreements which allow us to change agreements.

We make an agreement that we will finish the game, no matter what, unless something happens that keeps us from being able to finish it. We could get rained out.

We make an agreement through which we guarantee each other, as best we can, that the game we are playing will continue until it is over. The act by which we signify the completion of the game is the declaration of a winner.

Thus, if we get rained out, we'll start over again until the winner is declared. Thus, if we have to go into overtime, we'll continue the game

until a winner is declared. Thus, if we are playing a series, or engaged in a tournament, we will continue playing game after game until a winner is declared.

And yet it turns out that this agreement isn't one we can really keep. We find, over and over again, that *winning isn't enough*. Though it ends the game, it doesn't complete it. We want our last licks. We want the opportunity to see, since we lost before, if we can win this time. We want a grudge match. We need yet more proof.

If we lose, we want to continue playing until we've won. If we win, we play over and over again until we've finally, ultimately, lost. Sooner or later, everybody loses, finally. Sooner or later we discover that we aren't as good at the game as we once were. Yes, we won many. We achieved. We established records, accomplished great victories, were recipients of gold metals. But we have exhausted ourselves in the process. We have aged. Until, finally, we just can't keep up, and, finally, the game is over, for good.

Winning isn't enough. It doesn't provide us with a clear sense of completion. It doesn't work to end the game the way we want to end it—satisfied, accomplished, fulfilled.

No matter how much we try to fool each other into thinking that winning is what we're aiming at, is what brings us the ultimate completion, it doesn't work. It is an agreement that we can't keep. It is an agreement that we make for the sake of the game, but for our own sake, it doesn't work.

Imagine how incomplete you would feel if, before the game, you were already declared the winner. Imagine how purposeless the game would feel—even though the universal agreement was that you were the winner.

It is disillusioning, being a winner. As disillusioning as it is to be a loser. If you're a winner, you lose the reason to play. The game goes on, but you don't. If you're a loser, you lose reason. You go on, even though the game is already over.

And yet there must be some sense of completion, some sense of real accomplishment that provides all of this with a logical conclusion, that provides each of us with an undeniable experience of completion.

All right, what is it? What completes the game for us? What agreement can we make that will bring us to completion?

So far, I've only found one that works all the time, for everybody—the agreement that has given rise to the notion of the play community—the creation of a well-played game.

It is that completion that supersedes all other agreements. It is that completion that completes the game—even if we have to go into overtime to reach it. It is the realization of the well-played game that makes us timeless.

Winning, though the goal of a game, can't be the purpose for playing. Winning serves the purpose of helping us focus, of allowing us to create the challenge that lets us manifest our powers through the game. Winning ends the game, but not our purpose.

There must be some other purpose, then. How can I believe that the purpose of playing a game is nothing more than playing it well? What is the purpose of playing well? What behavioral objective, what growth or acquisition does this playing well satisfy?

So I conduct an interview. The next time I experience myself playing well, I ask myself, "Bernie, tell me, what is your purpose in playing well thus? I observe you making a rather concentrated effort and significant expenditure of energies. Towards what end is all this?"

Oddly enough, the interviewee acts as though I had been guilty of some profound disrespect in daring to ask such questions. "You're breaking up my game," says he to me, in a most undetached manner; "talk to me later."

So, I talk to him later. Again, I ask if he can tell me what my purpose was for playing so ardently. Again I am told to disappear.

It seems that the only conclusion either of me is able to draw is that the question, and not the game, is what is ludicrous.

If I'm playing well, I am, in fact, complete. I am without purpose because all my purposes are being fulfilled. I'm doing it. I'm making it. I'm succeeding. This is the reason I'm playing this game. This is the purpose of this game for me. The goals, the rules, everything I did in order to create the safety and permission I needed, were so that I could do this—so I could experience this excellence, this shared excellence of the well-played game. This is a veritable end unto itself.

Which leads me to ask: To what purpose is this purposelessness of which I now speak in such mystical tone?

The Purpose of Purposelessness

We are adults. We lead purposeful lives. We maintain our adulthood through our display of purposefulness. Not through playing with purpose but rather through displaying purpose.

We strive to become important—to do important things with other important adults. When our lives lack purpose there seems to be no reason for our continuing to live. When our purposes have been frustrated, when we are not able to accomplish what we have set forth as our goals, we scream in righteous indignation, in pain.

We seek purpose so strongly that when our purposes are finally, ultimately fulfilled—when we even come close enough to see that satisfaction is inevitable—we create, as swiftly as we can, other purposes.

Thus we ask ourselves what is the purpose of this purposeless activity. To what other, nobler end is this well-played game? Do we grow as a result? Do we become better at something else than the game? Do we earn status? Money? Wisdom?

It seems, when we think about it, that, for all our striving for purpose, we spend a great deal of time and energy doing and pursuing things without purpose.

There you are, caught in a moment of idleness, walking backward down the street. There you are, looking in store windows, not because you're interested in buying anything but because you want to be looking in store windows. There you are, kicking stones off the sidewalk. There you are telling jokes. There you are, just playing.

Why? What purpose does it serve? Why is this purposelessness so valuable to you? Why does it feel so good?

You're being playful. You like being playful. It feels good. As a matter of fact, you're very playful.

You play whenever you get the chance. You doodle. You listen to music. You twiddle your thumbs. You do nothing. You dream. You play with ideas. You toy with things. You turn everything else off, even the sense of purpose, and you just merely play.

It's as though you have a switch, somewhere, that lets you shut off the very force that gives you meaning, and you just play, without purpose, without meaning anything.

But why do you turn that switch?

If you could, you would play forever. Why do you turn the switch again? Why do you stop playing?

There are so many purposes, real purposes to attend to: survival, personal survival, survival of your family, of your home, of your country, your world; achieving excellence, achieving the ultimate victory, achieving wisdom, truth, enlightenment, a raise in pay.

In this book we've been creating yet other purposes. Our play community is purposeful, intentional. All that we do together is for the sake of something else. We want to play well together. We want to achieve excellence in something that ultimately doesn't even matter. And yet, when we reach that high together, we discover that we can have no other purpose left except to stay there forever.

Why? Why do we make it our purpose to be without purpose? Why do we create games that give us purpose only so we can, by playing them well together, be released from all purpose?

It is a balancing act. It is a dialog—a play between. On the one hand there is silliness, on the other seriousness. On this side confusion, on this clarity. Here delight, here despair. It is neither work nor play, purpose nor purposelessness that satisfies us. It is the dance between.

The game offers us a purpose. It says: Win. And we study the game, we learn the rules and regulations, the strategies that will help us win. Given the purpose, we seek the means.

Play offers us purposelessness. It says: Play! We can't even play for the purpose of enjoyment. We can't even play to have fun. We can have fun, we can enjoy ourselves while we are playing, but that is payoff, it isn't purpose. Purpose interferes with play. When we play for any purpose, when we detect purpose in someone else's play or in our own, we lose balance, we become distortions. When we play for praise, for grades, for trades, we find ourselves not really playing.

Odd, isn't it? Paradoxical. Apparently without solution. Is play the completion of game, or is the game completion of play? Uncomfortable, this consideration. What else can one do at such a time, facing such a profound problem, than generate hypotheses?

I generate hypotheses:

Hypotheses

Hypothesis the first, as arrived at through the process of self-observation: *The nature of surprise.*

Sometimes I enjoy myself. I take myself by surprise, somehow, and seeing myself, say, "Oh, what a funny man I am, indeed." I like doing this. I like taking myself by surprise, seeing the humor of it all.

In order to surprise myself, in order to take myself by surprise, I have to give myself something to do. I have to occupy myself in something that

myself can see a purpose in doing. Then, when I finally reach the point where I find myself doing this thing so well, so hard, so completely, I can suddenly look at myself from the other side, from the side that isn't taking this thing I'm doing seriously at all, and I can say, "All right! Get it together, baby! Do it! Yeah!"

I like seeing myself doing something well even as much as I like seeing myself being funny.

But I can't do it if I know I'm looking. I like losing myself in something so that I can find it again—newer, bigger, more excellent than I thought.

So, I give one of me something to do that it can take seriously. But it has to be something that the other of me can stay out of. Because I want it to be a good surprise, I make sure, to the best of my ability, that what I give myself to do is something that either self can do well—the self that wishes to accomplish, the self that wishes to enjoy. I occupy one so that the other can remain far enough away to delight in me.

And when I play a game, both of my selves can take turns being surprised.

Hypothesis the second, arrived at through contemplation of games in general: *Community*.

In order to play well together, we need something which we can all hold in common.

We each play differently. We each, because of whom we have each become, have struck a different balance between play and game. Each of us arrives at a definition of playing well. Each of us arrives at that definition separately. And yet it happens that we are led back to each other—to the discovery that we were only playing, to the experience of playing well together.

Hypothesis the third, arrived at through generalization in general: *Playing well*.

When we're playing, we're not thinking about how well we're playing. We're just playing. We're not even thinking about playing.

But we've discovered that there are times during which we can play well. We observe, we experience a certain fineness in our way of playing. We are experiencing mastery.

This mastery isn't over anything in particular. It's like the mastery of the artist who, having completed the painting, stands back in awe. A mastery

in. A union of mastery with mystery. This is the mastery that comes about in the harmony that is created between purpose and purposelessness. This is the game well played.

A Nonconclusion

It is poor style to generate hypotheses without going through to a conclusion. It creates a sense of being incomplete.

My purpose in writing this book was that the pursuit of the well-played game be continued in different forms—in the games we can play with each other.

Which leaves us, not with any sense of completion, but only with a few inklings of possibilities:

Inkling # 1

If we can validate play in our own lives, as adults, our children will not have to abandon play for the sake of becoming like us, nor will we have to abandon our purpose for the sake of becoming like them.

Inkling # 2

If we can create a well-played game, just one, we will be able to acknowledge, without embarrassment or question, our own and each other's genuine claim to excellence.

Inkling # 3

If we can create even larger games that we can all play well together—all of us—then there will be no separation between us and others, no *we* and *they*. We will all be one community. All one species.

Inkling # 4

If we can all play well together, if we can find out how to do that, we might be able to raise the stakes infinitely.

Appendix: A Million Ways to Play Marbles, at Least

Now here we have your basic marble.

Your basic marble is made of glass. Now it's true that there are other, even more basic marbles that are made of clay. And I suppose that sun-hardened clay marbles are even more basic than your kiln-dried pottery marbles.

On the other hand, you could have steel marbles. You could probably even have lead marbles, if you want. Wood marbles. Ice marbles.

Hey, ice marbles. I like that. Couldn't make water marbles, though. Maybe you could make marble-sized balloons and fill them with water.

Or, how about balloon-sized marbles?

Which brings me to the point about size.

Your basic marble is exactly five-eighths of an inch in diameter. And then, of course, you get your more basic marble, which is maybe a half inch or maybe even an inch in diameter. I suppose if you want to get even more basic than that, your really basic marble is whatever you can hold a bunch of without dropping. Though, I admit that you could be thinking about how many is a bunch and what your standard-size hand is. Though you could also be thinking about whether you could consider a pool ball to be one of your basic-sized marbles, which, I guess if you really want to get basic, you could say depends on the size of the hand that holds them. But if anybody had a hand big enough to hold say a lot of pool balls, well, that would make them just as basic as anything else in the basic sense of it. But I wouldn't call bowling balls marbles. No way. Though you could play marbles with bowling balls.

All right. So much for the definition of your "basic marble." But that doesn't tell us what "playing marbles" is. So, how do you play marbles?

Well, there's your basic, well, there's your general rule that you play marbles by shooting one into the other, if you know what I mean. What you try to do, generally, is to get one marble to hit another.

Of course, if you're speaking in general terms, you could also get one marble to hit another by dropping one marble onto the marble that you want that marble to hit, if you catch my meaning.

I suppose you could also roll it down a ramp, or something. Maybe through a tube.

Hey, that'd be neat. We could get all these junk pipes and put together this big, complicated thing to roll marbles through. Oh, and we could make some parts of it swivel so we could make infinite adjustments, you know, and shoot a marble anywhere. I wonder how far we could make it shoot? Trajectory!

Yeah, you could throw marbles. You could launch them into the air on, well, marble launchers. You could launch them from spoons, too.

You could carry them in spoons. Look, we could each have a spoon and see if we could pass a marble around in a circle without ever dropping it. We could see how many marbles we can keep going at the same time—maybe in both directions. Maybe some of us would lie down and we'd have to pass them up and down, too. Or maybe if we were moving.

How would it be to play tag like that? We'd each have a spoon, I guess. And there'd be this one marble, and whoever had that one was *it*. And he'd have to try to catch us without dropping his marble. No, that'd make it too hard. Everybody should have a marble except *it*. No.

All right, so back to your basic question, "How do you generally play marbles?"

Generally speaking, I'd say it depends.

First of all, I'd say it depends on where you're playing. You're supposed to be playing marbles on a marble court. I suppose if you want to be playing on something that wasn't a marble court, you could play marbles there too.

See, if you're playing marbles on the dirt, then you got your dirt rules, and if you're playing on the rug, then you got your rug rules. What would it be like playing on a hill? I never heard of any hill rules.

I guess the idea would be, well, let's see, if I shot a marble uphill, it would roll back to me, right? Well, maybe, if I can get the right curve or can bounce it off the right things. Now that'd be an accomplishment! So, maybe if I could even hit one of your marbles, and still get my marble

back, well, say within arm's length of this spot, huh, what do you think of that?

On the other hand, if we were playing downhill, you know what would be the thing to try? How about trying to get the marble to stop rolling? That'd be hard, I bet. Especially if you have to make it stop inside this circle here.

Now, if what we're talking about is the *real* way to play marbles, well, that's another thing altogether.

The real way to play marbles is to play them on a court, like I said before. And, well, sure you can have a lot of different courts, if you want. I mean, there's your round court and your square one, and maybe your oval, or what about your star-shaped one. And there's your court with things drawn inside—lines and circles and things.

How about making this maze, see. I mean, we could draw this really hard maze and try to play marbles without crossing any of the lines. I know, you'll start from one end, and I'll start from the other, and then, when we get close enough, we can try to knock each other's marbles out of the maze. Look, we'll make five openings on this side, and five on mine, and we'll each take five marbles, and we'll start each marble on an opening, and we'll take turns, and whenever it's your turn, you can try to go further into the maze or hit one of my marbles. Oh, and if your marble goes over a line, you got to start it all over from the beginning. Yeah, I guess we should try one with the lines a lot farther apart.

Which is another question about how far apart we should start out from. I mean, if we started from really far away, we could bowl them, maybe. Maybe we should try it with bowling balls?

At any rate, the question is, "What is your standard, basic, true marble game in general?"

Are you talking about the standard basic true marble game in which you try to roll marbles into targets in general, or are you talking about your standard basic true marble game in which you generally try to hit other marbles?

Well, if you're talking about *all* marble games, then you have to consider the ones that don't use targets. Unless you think that trying to roll a marble around in a cup has a target to it.

Ever try to roll a marble around in a cup? Ever roll the marble around so fast that it just shot out of the cup? Ever try to catch it before it rolled away? Before it hit the ground?

Of course, if you're talking about the serious game of marbles, that's another thing again.

What you think of, seriously, as a serious marble game is the kind that lets you really concentrate, really focus, you know, holding the marble just right, looking at all the possibilities, deciding, aiming, shooting.

Well, rolling, actually. Of course, one could flick it into the air a bit. It would be really interesting if we tried to flick one marble over another so it landed just behind, just on the other side. Maybe landed and kept rolling and maybe even hitting your marble too.

I suppose even dropping would give us a real game too. I mean, you can get really good at dropping if you do it a lot. A head-height drop would naturally be worth more than a knee-height drop.

Now, a two-marble drop would also be interesting. Suppose the idea was to drop two marbles onto one of your other marbles in such a way as to send them all rolling into your opponent's marbles.

Of course, if we were talking about steel marbles, the game would be much heavier. On the other hand, clay marbles would give rise to an interesting experience of fragility. Ice marbles. Now, there's a possibility.

Hey, that way we could play water marbles, with eye-droppers. What if we used colored water? You know, if we played it on a piece of paper . . . on a slanted piece of paper, then the drops would move. And it would look neat when the game was over. I mean, the paper would be all streaked from where the drops moved. And splattered too, I bet. And I bet we could make a really pretty thing that way, playing marbles.