# Games

The thing that makes games so useful to us in exploring a playful path is that they aren't for real. They're for play. And whatever significances we want to attribute to them are just that - significances we attribute to them. They, in fact, are not significant. They are not supposed to be. They're for fun.

O, sure, you can play for things other than fun. You can play for money. You can play for status, for acceptance, for manifesting your innate superiority and intrinsic value to the universe. But none of that has anything to do with the game itself. Poker is poker, whether you play for money or drinks or getting to see each other naked.

**"Fun is better than winning"**
*-The Oaqui*

# The theater of games

The games kids play - in playgrounds, backyards, wherever they are free to play like kids - offer opportunities for a range of role-taking and group-building activities; and their cultivation should be recognized as extensions of drama. Such games may be woven into workshops for reminding people how to play, how to explore spontaneity and the building of mutually supportive relationships. Though degrees and types of competition vary, from everybody wins to some win/lose, they're still games as long as "it's fun!"

I had my Master's in Theater[vii] and I was hired by the School District of Philadelphia to write a drama curriculum for elementary school teachers. I was working with inner-city children between the ages of 5-11, most of whom were sent to us because they were someone else's behavior problem. I very much wanted to help the kids create some kind of theater experience that they found meaningful, relevant, and, most importantly, fun. My single criterion for success was: if I walked out of the room for two minutes, would the kids be doing the same thing when I came back. It was really the only way I could think of to be sure that they were doing it for themselves, and not for a grade or for me. This was a very tough test for my understanding of what it meant to teach theater.

Nothing I tried really worked. They didn't warm-up to the warm-ups. They were too skittish for the skits. O, they were polite. And they'd do what I asked. But nothing clicked. Eventually, I unearthed my Viola Spolin book, Improvisation for the Theater[viii], and tried some of her theater games. They were enthusiastic about the game part. But the moment I stepped out of the room, chaos ensued in all its many chaotic glories. Finally, out of desperation, I asked them if there were anything at all that they actually wanted to play together. "Yes," they chorused, "a game."

A game. not a theater game. Just a plain, playful kids game. "You know," they appended, "like Duck-Duck-Goose." "Duck-Duck-Goose"? That's the game where everyone sits in a circle and one kid, the Fox, taps each kid on the head and says "Duck" until she reaches the one kid she wants to get chased by. She calls the kid "Goose." The Goose stands up and gives chase. If tagged by the Goose before getting to the Goose's vacated seat, the Fox has to start over again. If not tagged, the kid that got, um, chosen is the new Fox. It struck me as a playful game, with really no relevance to the higher dramatic arts. But a deal is a deal. So we played. And after a while, I walked out, and after another while, I came back in. And they were still playing!

They even invited me to play. I was honored, but hesitant. I gave in. I played their game. Because it was theirs. And, yes, I had fun. And while I was having all that fun I began to be able to appreciate the game as more than a game. As, in fact, theater. For us potential Geese,

it was all about acting like you wanted to get chosen (or not). Too enthusiastic or blasé, and you stay a Duck forever. For the Goose, it was about whom do you pick, and how hard do you run. Pick a friend who is faster than you? Pick someone you don't like who is slower than you? Pick someone you want to like? Someone you want to like you?

And once the Goose is chosen, the game achieves something like high drama. The Goose jumps up and gives chase. Can the Fox make it back to the Goose's home place and free herself of the curse of Foxhood? Will the Goose tag the Fox and damn it to yet another cycle of Foxiness? Unless, of course, the Goose doesn't really want to catch the Fox. Unless the Goose actually wants to become Fox herself. But what if the Fox wants to remain Fox? What if she doesn't run so fast, or stumbles, or has other sly strategies for maintaining her Foxiness yet another round.

As the drama unfolds, the rest of us Ducks, temporarily relieved of any further involvement, observe in relieved delight. Will the Fox make it? Is it a good chase? Do they run as if being Fox or Goose were as important as life itself? Or as if it were just plain playful?

Forty years later, while in Israel, in a place called Moshav Modi'in, I was speaking to a family (one of the founding families) about the "theater of games" - exemplifying it with my typical story of Duck-Duck-Goose. I was talking in particular about how children play with trying to get "not chosen" if they don't want to be picked. One of the people I was talking with, a woman named Leah, mentioned to me how a skill like that was a matter of life and death for people in the camps (concentration camps). I went silent. I nodded. I cried. I went on.

# The dramaturgy of games

I had to play it first. And when I did, I realized that the clearly playful game of Duck-Duck-Goose fully satisfied my criteria for a meaningful, kid-produced, kid-acted, kid-directed, theatrical experience. It was highly dramatic. It was something they actually wanted to do, actually could organize and become engaged with. Thus I began work on my "theater" curriculum and my lifelong exploration of the Theater of Games.

I soon discovered I was working within a global theater. Searching for more and more games, I found books of games from all over the world. The games that are played out in the Theater of Games are in fact a form of literature – not written, maybe, not even oral, perhaps, but "enacted" – and thus handed down, from generation to generation, neighbor to neighbor, culture to culture. The literature of games can convey complex relationships, roles and consequences, issues of conflict and heroism.

The comic-tragedy of Duck-Duck-Goose holds a great fascination for young audiences, and is one of many variations on a theme of what one can only call the "Game of Tag."

Somebody's IT.

One person is singled out and assigned a role different from the undifferentiated many. This makes his actions so monstrously predictable that we call him IT, because in order to do what he's supposed to, he always has to do it.

IT Doesn't Want to Be IT.

In fact, IT's only goal is to make somebody else IT.

If IT tags you (all it takes is contact), you're IT (instantaneous reversal of roles).

Before most children play Tag, they find themselves fascinated into sheer delight by a group of tag-like "games" called "Monster." Played by very small children – almost as soon as they are old enough to waddle – and large adults. Somebody is Monster —usually it's type-cast. That person, IT-like, chases everybody else. Everybody else runs and runs until the Monster catches them and eats, or tickles, them up. Then, everybody runs away again, and the Monster does his thing. The kids play the Monster to laughing exhaustion. And then wait to continue the drama the moment the Monster shows signs of readiness.

As a theater piece, it's as profound as it is entertaining. It describes a relationship between pretend fear and its pretend victims. It is an irreversible relationship. It is enforced equally by

the pursued as well as the pursuer. By the time children begin playing tag, they are more interested in games where the role of authority is reversible, where the drama resides as much in the relationship as it does in the roles. Like any good drama, the game only works as long as there is conflict and as long as we are interested in that conflict. If IT never catches anyone, if the same person is always IT, the game is no fun. The drama of Tag is in the contest for position, even though the position is, in itself, untenable. The person in the role of IT is the Labeled One. The conflict centers on who gets to be what, how, and for how long. In some games, everyone wants to be the Labeled One. Everyone. At the same time, no one really wants to be labeled for very long. It's much more fun to be running away than be running after. The drama reaches its peak and, once having become identified as IT, the whole game depends on IT finding someone else to be IT. (Another variation of the game would occur if IT wanted to keep his position and get rid of his responsibility.)

And then within the Tag dramaturgy we find game theater pieces such as the one in which IT is given the power to decide when people can try to get him (Red Light). And the one where IT can even be able to tell people how they can move (Captain, May I?). And then there's the tag game where IT has the power to decide when the chase is going to start (What's The Time, Mr. Wolf?), and the one where IT has to publicly declare his intended victims (Johnny, May I Cross the River?), and of course Duck Duck Goose. And the one where IT might even be able to get people to help him (British Bulldog). On the other hand, IT might not have as much territory as everybody else (Circle Tag), or people might have an easy escape (Freeze Tag), or even substitute other players (Squirrel in the Tree). Sometimes there are people who are neither IT or NOT IT, but who are there just to make it harder for IT (Cat and Mouse). Sometimes, IT can try to touch people with an object instead of his hand (Ball Tag). Sometimes, IT has an object that he is trying to put somewhere (Steal The Bacon; Football).

Then there are the versions of Tag when there is more than one IT – when there's us and them. Sometimes, if one of us gets tagged, we lose the whole game (Guard the King). Sometimes, when one of us gets tagged, we join the other team (Lemonade; Crows 'N Cranes). Sometimes, we and they both have the power of tagging, and if we get tagged by the wrong guys (them), we are out of the game until we get tagged by the right guys (Prisoner's Base; 5-10-Ringo).

Though there is conflict between IT and NOT-IT, no score is being kept. Though you may really not want to be IT, and though you might find your self being IT much, much longer than you bargained for, you never actually lose. Or, for that matter, win. After spending so much time on Tag, it almost comes as a shock to discover how different those very, very familiar games are from the games we have come to think of as "real" – the sports and contests that make up the world of educationally and commercially-supported fun, the win-lose, zero-sum.

In the dramaturgy of play, Tag is a type of game in a continuum of games. In my published-

43-years-ago-no-longer-available *Interplay Curriculum*, I identified four different game types, looking at games not so much in terms of competition and cooperation, winning or losing, but rather in terms of the relationships they depicted. Tug-of-war, for example, went in the same volume as "Pit-a-Pat" (Pattycake) where nobody's IT and everybody ultimately loses because it seemed to me that both games are really hard to quit – players are in a relationship to each other and have to somehow work it out to its conclusion. Tag and Hide and Seek went into the volume called "Locating" – because the focus is on finding oneself in relationship to the group. Two other volumes "Expressing" (more traditional "pretending" games) and "Adjusting" (games that involved the changing of rules or goals). Each of these volumes had further classifications – how "active" the game was, how it was configured (individual, individual-group, individual-team, team-group, and team-team. Then there was a classification I called "locus of control." Despite the intelligence and practicality of my classification scheme, almost as soon as the curriculum was printed I was forced to admit that there was yet a more effective, and more fun approach. Play a game. Any game will do. And then, when you have the opportunity, play a different game. And the game that turns out to be the most fun for everyone will also prove to be the most healing. So play that one again.

# The way of games

The more I played with adults, and the more groups I played with, the more deeply I appreciated the power of children's games. I learned that, in less than a day, I could take a group of strangers, from virtually any background, and, playing children's games, create a community – a responsive, supportive, open, attentive, Play Community. And in five days, these total strangers'd be all over each other like kittens!

I discovered in the great variety of children games, games that could help people explore different ways of relating to each other. I learned that my repertoire of children's games gave me a kind of language of relationships – one that I could easily share and that could prove instrumental in helping people create truly supportive, mutually empowering relationships.

Having faith in the fun of it all is an important first step towards the effective use of children's games in almost any setting – professional, therapeutic or recreational. But, as most first steps, it's only the first. Here are some next:

Make and keep participation voluntary. The success of any game depends on the psychological and physical safety of its players. By keeping participation voluntary at all times, participants can safely regulate their level of involvement, almost regardless of level of trust. Sometimes, you can do this by establishing a "safe area" – an "out-of-bounds" place for people to retreat to as needed. Often, I find my self having to devote maybe a whole session to "quitting practice." If people know it's really all right to quit (well, maybe you have to give a warning before you opt out of being say the base of a human pyramid), then they know that everyone is playing only because they want to.

Let the games be the thing. Children's games can reach very deep into the individual and collective adult psyche. They are full of lessons to be learned. When a game doesn't work (a.k.a. isn't fun), the lessons can all too easily become personal. The temptation to "process" begins to overpower the opportunity to enjoy each other. Here's the key: it's a lot easier to change the game than the people who are playing it. If a game doesn't work, change it. Or play something else. "Play," as they say, "on."

Don't let one game be the only thing. Even if people really like playing Duck-Duck-Goose, and are finding the drama so relevant that it becomes, in fact, the only game they play, having a choice of games is as important to the participant as it is to the group. It's the difference between a "game community" and a "play community" – in the game community, it's the game that ultimately decides who's good enough to play. In the play community, it's the players who decide if the game's good enough. Start something else going with the people in the safe area. Even if you're the only one there.

Invite invention. No game is as fun as the one the players are making up. No game is as well-adapted to the people you happen to be with, or where you happen to be, or what you happen to have to play with. The larger the shared game repertoire, the easier it is to find new ways to play together. It is a delicious circle.

The "best" games for creating this kind of collective sense of safety and openness tend to be those that are most intentionally designed to be fun. These games are often not even scored. Often there isn't even a winner. These games are generally fun, and often make people laugh. I call them "Playful Games" not only because no one keeps score, but also because we play them for no purpose other than the fun they bring us.

I've used "fun" three times in the last paragraph. It is impossible to overstate how central the fun connection is to the healing quality of the game – as it is played and experienced. In fact, as you widen the group's repertoire of games, fun turns out to be the best and most reliable criterion for finding just the right game for bringing the group to just the right place.

Most children's games, and any of those Playful Games I've written about can be welcome tools, any time you need to set the stage for almost any kind of theatrical or role-playing relationship people want to explore. But it is important to remember that when you play for "fun," games not only set the stage, but also become the stage – a stage where even the most fundamental of conflicts and the deepest of dramas can be played, with delight.

# *Games as a way of understanding*

Luckily, for the purpose of this particular conversation, all you need to know about "game theory" is that you can use what you understand about how games work to understand more about how people work – societies, cultures, economies, political systems, communities, families. I say "luckily" because game theory goes very deep into very obscure realms, obscure enough that people get Nobel Prizes for making sense out of it.

The thing that all this proves is that there is something about games that seems to reflect on something other than games – something that games mirror more clearly than other mirrors we try to hold to human nature. If you start thinking of all the games you know as a language, what you will find described in that language are the foundations of human relationships.

Once I published my *Interplay Games Curriculum*, I began teaching what I had learned about children's games to adults. This is when I first understood the connection between games and relationships, and what led me to founding the Games Preserve[ix].

I was teaching a group of teachers who, once a week, for almost a year, came to a place called Durham Child Development Center[x], to explore children's games with me. They were young, motivated, caring – inspiring to be with and play with and talk with. It was they who helped me understand the power of the game language. Because they began using it to explore their own lives – their relationships, not just to teaching, but to community, to family, to the people they loved and worked with and grew with. And when they did talk about teaching, they were describing not the children as students, but the children as community. We'd play something like Lemonade (a team tag game in which if you get tagged you join the winning team – similar to Rock-Scissors-Paper Tag) and after everyone caught their breath and stopped laughing, they would get suddenly struck by the difference between this experience of "losing" and the kind of losing that results in your having to stop playing. And they'd begin to talk about how such a redefinition of losing would impact so much of their lives, and the lives of the kids they teach, and the parents of those kids, and, well, everything.

And in the process, we'd begin to explore all the definitions of losing and winning, and all the ways we could redefine them, and we'd feel (OK, it was the 70s) we could, just by playing with the consequences of losing a game, redefine our world. It was game theory at its best, at its most revealing and most healing.

We could have just as easily talked about winning, or the sheer, panicky fun of not knowing which way to run, or the strange joy of sharing the ritual that led up to each encounter. And, eventually, we did. Unless another game interested us more. And as we continued, game after

game, we were experiencing, in the very ways we played together, the very alternatives we thought we might be able to create together. And we became remarkably intelligent, remarkably close, remarkably fun.

# The wisdom of games

Ever since I discovered the wisdom of games, I've suspected that they are more powerful than I guessed. I'm beginning to think that they may be, in their playful way, the kind of Jungian archetypes described as "primordial images and symbols found in the collective unconscious, which - in contrast to the personal unconscious - gathers together and passes on the experiences of previous generations, preserving traces of humanity's evolutionary development over time."[x] I've come to see them as mythical metaphors, as Joseph Campbell has come to understand myth and metaphor.

They are a theater without dialogue, a literature without words, each one revealing its wisdom in play. I have learned to see children's games as scripts for a kind of children's cultural theater. I see them as collective dreams in which certain themes are being toyed with – investigated and manipulated for the sake of sheer catharsis or some future reintegration into a world view. They are reconstructions of relationships – simulations – (myths) – which are guided by individual players, instituted by the groups in which they are played or abstracted by the traditions of generations of children.

For grown-ups, it's even more powerful – playing children's games again, rediscovering, reinterpreting, reapplying their meaning. It leads to an even more expansive kind of theater. Participating in a play community as adults, endowed with empathy and compassion and years of hard-won knowledge, with obligations and responsibilities and actually deeper freedom – we redefine our selves, and the world.

And what seems to happen when we engage in all these playful conversations is this: we rediscover our ability to play in the world, and to give each other the gift of play. We rediscover our unlimited selves. We reaffirm fun. We let our selves out to play and find our selves and each other once again on a playful path.

# Cat and Mouse

There's a kids' game called Cat and Mouse. I'm sure you know it. If you're German you probably know it as Katz und Maus. If your from Afghanistan, Wolf and Sheep.

Anyhow, you get two kids playing tag. One is the cat or wolf, the other the sheep or mouse. And then you have the rest of the kids holding hands in a circle. The mouse or sheep finds safety inside the circle. The wolf or cat finds the circle basically annoying.

The kids in the circle are naturally more sympathetic to the needs of the mouse/sheep than to those of the wolf/cat. It could have something to do with childhood and the myriad opportunities it provides for one to feel prey-like.

Such is the nature of mice and sheep that they can't really stay still, or safe, for long. They just have to see how close they can get to the cat/wolf, because it's fun to tease, especially if you think you have a strong, vigilant circle of friends to protect you. The wolf/cat constantly tests the circle, looking for weak links, places where it can dodge under or leap over.

What I find especially interesting about the game itself is not so much the play between the cat and the mouse (by any other name), but between the ring and the two antagonists. The ring is the community, the village, the collective mediator whose responsibility it is not just to protect the cat/mouse (if it really succeeded the game would become interminably boring), but rather to keep the opposing forces in balance. Sometimes, for the fun and fairness of it all, it's necessary to let the mouse/sheep out, sometimes to let the cat/wolf through.

# Hide and Seek

The hider acts as if she might very well remain hidden forever. The seeker acts as if he will never stop seeking. They both know they are only pretending.

To succeed, they learn to lure each other out: the seeker pretends that he has stopped seeking, the hider that she might come out of hiding. The seeker feigns fury. The hider feigns fear.

The difference between a puzzle and a problem is that you know the puzzle has a solution. To solve either, you must act as if you will never, never give up, never stop seeking. Or you pretend to have given up in the hopes that the solution will reveal itself, will come out of hiding.

You never forget that you're looking for the answer, you just pretend that you have stopped trying to find it, for a while, for as long as it takes the answer to appear.

To seek well, you know that you are free to stop seeking. To hide well, you know that you are free to stop hiding. Sometimes, just to manifest that freedom, you pretend you've stopped for real, for ever; but even then you know you are playing. Because you are fundamentally that: a player. Because play is how the mind minds, and the soul soars.

# Hot Bread and Butter

Twenty children on a street in the city. It is Spring, just after dinner. Suddenly, something begins pulling them together. They cluster near a wide stoop. There is a cry of "Not It!" One body is released: a boy, about ten. He has a belt in his hand. He is running back and forth across the street; stopping every so often – near steps, a truck, an abandoned car, an apartment door. He circles around the group. I can hear some giggles, some "hurry-ups." The boy is now walking on tiptoe towards the group. His hands are empty. I realize why the group hasn't reacted to him yet – their eyes are closed. He is right next to them now. "Hot Bread and Butter," he says, "come and get your supper."

The children scatter like an exploding atom, screaming . Some stay close to each other. Others gallop into the frontier, probing the darkest secrets of the street. A scream. Someone has found the belt and is hitting everybody who dares be near. Now she is rushing around, twirling the belt over her head like a lariat. Everyone is running back, trying to touch base before getting beaten. The last one has been herded into the cowering mass. Silence. Eyes closed. Darkness. She hides the belt.

In school, I asked a group of children if they wanted to play "Hot Bread and Butter." The response was enthusiastic and unanimous. I brought out a Boffer, which is part of a set of plastic foam swords. There were a few mutters of disapproval. I asked what was wrong and one of the boys told me that I was supposed to use a belt. In my best voice of adult wisdom, I expounded on the Dangers of Belts. I then rolled up a section of newspaper.

More mutters.

"All right," I said, "we'll try a belt. But first, whoever doesn't want to play, whoever realizes how dangerous a belt can be, move up to the Safe Area." No one moved. "You all understand what I mean," I said. "It's really O.K. to watch a game if you want. A belt can really hurt. I'll just wait a little longer to see if anyone wants to change his mind." I waited. "I'll go out of the room and come back." I went and come back. No one had moved. And then we played a game – with the belt.

This was the first and clearest lesson I learned about the nature of social games as simulations. I realized the belt was crucial to the game – not because of tradition, but because of the real power it represented. The possibility, the potential for danger had to be there for the game to be fun.

I was impressed, first of all, by the equilibrium of the game, the justice of the mechanisms for conferring power: whoever was brave enough to stray away from the base and lucky enough

to find the belt became the master of the game and the next hider. Whoever wished to be cautious could stay as close to the base as necessary. Some children never got hit. They also never got the belt.

"Hot Bread and Butter," among other things, represents an idea of power. To gain power, you must 1) take certain risks, and 2) be lucky. To use your power effectively, you must not use it too strongly. Only on one occasion did I see a child hit others too hard. The next child who found the belt went after the tyrant – and for the rest of the game the offender never wandered more than ten feet from the base. Alliances didn't seem to be of much help. The overcautious don't have much fun. And, finally, when there are no more worlds to conquer, you set the sword in the stone and watch.

But why did they want to play that particular game? I suppose, without much interpretation, we could point out parallel methods for the acquisition and transference of power in various tribal societies and in certain industries.

But "Hot Bread and Butter" is not played to simulate or gain insight into other cultures. It is played because 1) it is fun, and 2) because it echoes a reality that is becoming evident to the society of children who play it.

In "Hot Bread and Butter" you gain power through risk and luck – not through direct confrontation – but only once the power has already been abdicated. As a child grows towards adulthood, he is approaching the time in which adult power is left to him – if he can take it. It is the opportunity that he must seize, not the person that he must confront. The power of the adult cannot be taken from an adult, it must be discovered within the person of the child.

Most children who play "Hot Bread and Butter" are between the ages of nine and fourteen. When I tried to play it with younger children, the equilibrium was lost. Many children didn't leave the base. Those who found the belt either hit too hard or spent the round trying to keep the belt for themselves. I had to teach the game. I had to control. I had a lousy time, and so did most of the children. "Hide and Seek" however, which is related in structure to "Hot Bread and Butter." was a total success.

In other words, when children choose to play a particular game – when they establish a contract for what they are going to play with – they do so because the game is related to other experiences, because it provides them with a platform upon which they can create and explore a model which helps them define their relationship to other experiences, experiences which they are beginning to perceive as themes in their daily lives.

They call this pursuit "Fun."

They play with toys because toys are models in which they can explore their relationships to

their physical environment. They play with games because games are the only vehicle they have available to them in which they can explore their relationships to the social environment.

When the problem of the game is solved, when you know what to do to win, the social fantasy is ended and the game is no longer fun. Fun is present when the possibility of winning is as great as the possibility of losing; when the challenge is strongest; when opportunities to learn are widest. When a game is won, it is over. Winning and fun are not always congruent. When a game is won repeatedly, it is abandoned.

But what amazed me the most about playing children's games with children was that somehow problems were being solved. Most of the groups I worked with could be characterized as follows: The first session was always choked with tension. Children couldn't decide on a game to play. If someone bumped into someone else, there was a fight. The gentlest game I could come up with, even "Simon Says," ended in chaos, pain and tears for most of us. Only if I insisted on maintaining control at every moment of the session – if I never allowed a game to develop for more than a few minutes – was there any sense of joy. Eight sessions later, in almost every group I worked with, I was able to play along with the children. They made and reinforced the controls. Fighting was the result of only the most dire breach of trusts. Accidents were treated as accidents and not as invitations to confrontation.

And this transformation occurred no matter what games were played. There was no such thing as a better game, there appeared no logical scope and sequence; for violence didn't need to be explored again.

# Braving the game

It takes bravery to play a game. Like it takes bravery to love someone. Bravery, because the more deeply you do either, the more completely you give your self over to the other. It's what you have to do to love fully, play fully. Which is an unavoidable outcome of playing a game or loving someone in the first place. And the more profoundly you play the game and love that person, the more profoundly you can get hurt by it or him or her or them.

We put our selves in harm's way, we open our selves to the possibility that someone could choose to hurt us. Having fun with someone, loving someone, playing with someone; these are the gifts we open wide for, and I think knowing that we can get hurt is part of the fun.

I think a comedian, standing, alone, in a giant theater; a busker standing on the corner, acting like a statue; a street musician, an artist putting up a show in a museum, a professor preparing to lecture - despite how they act, they are not fearless. They temporarily set aside fear so they have the room they need to be filled with love, to be completely in play, to live meaningfully. They set it aside, temporarily, but it remains close, always close. Dangerously close. And as brave as they are, and as meaningful as their lives become, they are never so foolish as to let themselves forget their fears.