Playing For Fun

**"Might as well remove the doubt -
fun is what it's all about."**
- The Oaqui

Games are for Fun

As I might have heretofore mentioned, I have spent what others might deem an inordinate amount of time playing, talking about, teaching, thinking about, inventing, exploring, researching, writing about games: games of just about every possible description for every possible audience for every conceivable purpose. I've spent so much of my life doing this that I can't name anyone else alive, or not institutionalized, who has devoted him- or herself so thoroughly and for such a long time to games.

During my earlier years, I devoted much of my time to looking for permission, corroboration, sanity checks, opportunities, paid opportunities, offers of support, like minds – and now, at the age of 72 and-a-quarter, having achieved by virtue of nothing more than the years I've spent, an almost tangible aura of venerability. I have arrived at a certain elder perspective on this game thing. And, just recently, I have achieved the significantly institutional validation that comes from having a book that I wrote and published 35 years ago republished by M.I. T. (yes, that M.I.T.) Press.

All the aforementioned, lumped together, has inspired me to share with you the singlemost profound insight that I have been apparently placed on this planet to achieve:

A) Games are for fun.
2) The more fun, the better.

One could easily extrapolate that observation to apply to phenomena far beyond the purview of mere games. The more fun, the better. One could say that about education. One could say that about love. And one, such as this one, could say that about life.

Those varied ramifications, however, go beyond the scope of this particular and personal exposition, insofar as my field of recognized expertise needs must remain within the clearly defined confines of the things we actually call games.

Games, I say, are for fun. And the more fun a game is, the better the game.

True, verily, many and varied are the reasons for games and playing them. More varied now, I dare say, than at any other time in recorded, and perhaps even unrecorded history.

There are games for learning, games for building community, games for building the body, games for healing, games for growth, games for solving complex problems, games for communicating; there are board games and computer games and serious games and role playing games and pervasive games.

But of all the purported purposes, what I am here to teach is this: the most substantial and consequential benefit of a game is the fun that you create and share playing it. The more fun, the more deeply you learn, the stronger you become, the more complete the solution, the communication, the community, the greater the growth, the more totally you heal. And yes, you could also say that about life.

The Fun-Focused game

When we talk about a fun-focused game, we're generally not talking about the game itself, but about the players and their reasons for playing.

Some games are designed that way, to be played just for fun, to invite playfulness, laughter, spontaneity, creativity. I can think of three kinds, off-hand: player-designed games (more about these later) party games and drinking games. But even these games can fall flat, very, very, flat, if the players aren't in that fun-focused mood. The designer, at best, can only invite fun. It's up to the players to bring it with them.

Thing about fun-focused games is that they're not so much about the fun that any one particular player or team is having. Usually, no matter what game you play, somebody has fun. The thing that makes this whole idea so worth thinking about is that fun-focused games are all about everybody having fun, certainly everybody who wants to be having fun.

This kind of game, the fun-focused kind, is not about getting the highest score, even though points might be awarded and score might be kept. Getting the highest score is not the point. Winning isn't the point. The point is getting to share that special state of spirit, mind and body that we call "fun."

The "fun focus" can be applied to any game - anything that we play or do, actually.

The fun focus helps people get together, together. And energized. And nothing does this faster and more wholesomely than a game that you play for fun. Especially if the game is presented in such a way that it is:

- easy to understand,
- easy to play,
- easy to quit,
- short,
- safe,
- fun,
- fun,
- inclusive,
- voluntary,
- and clearly non-threatening.

The Play Community and the Game Community

There are at least two different communities that form in support of playing together – one is what you might call a "game community," the other a "play community."

Every game and sport that becomes a cultural institution forms a community— a game community— and members of that community have only one thing in common, but very much in common – the particular game being played.

When you are part of a game community that comes together for a poker night, a game with the girls, or a football match; to some clear degree, it's the mastery of that game that keeps you involved. At some point, your proficiency at the game, or at what you do in support of the game, determines your place in the game community. Playing is good. Winning a lot is better. In other words, it's the game that determines if you're good enough to be part of that community.

In a play community, it's the players, you and everyone you're playing with, who determine whether the game is good enough. If it's not, you change it. You change something about the rules, or you discover a hitherto unknown variation, or you play something entirely else. It's you who determines if the game is good enough.

Most informal games – street games, pick-up games, playground games – are played by a play community. Most formal games, like Little League Baseball and Lawn Bowling, are played by a game community.

Commercial and historical forces tend to embrace game communities, and vice versa. Little League Baseball and Lawn Bowling are not just games, they are cultural events, they are sports.

Ultimately, the majority of people aren't good enough to participate in the kinds of games played by game communities, especially when compared to the skills of the masters and grandmasters of the game.

Ultimately in the play community, everyone is good enough. Because it's not any particular game that people have come together to play. Because the reason they have come together is to play, not necessarily to win, or even to keep score, but to play together, and be part of an event in which anyone can play, in which everyone is a master.

In the play community it's mystery, not mastery that draws people together – it's the mystery of shared imagination, of spontaneity and synergy, of generalized laughter and much mutual

admiration, of shared fun.

When children are young, they first form play communities, and usually, if they can avoid formal intervention, they'll continue expanding and diversifying the play communities they support and that support them well into adulthood.

It is no coincidence that the Internet, though it serves both kinds of community (play and game), is so easily characterized as a play community, dependent on openness and trust shared by its players, succeeding to the degree in which it can respond to their constantly evolving, individual and collective interests.

Most often, game communities share characteristics with play communities, and vice versa. In both, members show mutual respect for play – for supporting fantasy, keeping rules, observing boundaries…

People who come together for a "friendly game" – the weekly mahjong game with the girls – are not about winning. What, you can win maybe $2.00. They're about being with other people who know the game just about as well as they do, well-enough not to take it too seriously.

Once you've identified the principle members of a "friendly game" community, it becomes more and more like a play community. Even to the point of changing rules. It's not about the game any more. We're all good enough.

The same is true at chess clubs and bridge clubs. Those community members who are good enough get together to play for fun.

The rewards of participation in a game community are often highly tangible – statues and money even. Those for a play community are the experience of community itself, of affinity, membership, acceptance, mutuality, respect, appreciation.

Inclusive games

Inclusive games. Contrast this to games where, if you make a mistake, you are "out" until the game is frackin' over. Or games you're not allowed to play because you're not "good enough."

Inclusive games. Games that everybody who wants to play, can play. Games where no one is ever in the mush pot or anything other that keeps them from playing. Games where anyone who wants to play who happens to be in a wheelchair, or blind, or young or old, or can't speak English, or can't speak at all – gets to play.

The idea of inclusion was the key to most of the games we played during New Games festivals. Just as key to what makes Playful games as genuinely fun as they are, and all the games you play for laughs as deeply funny as they are.

The games that are played by a play community are, by definition, inclusive. In a play community it's assumed that you can change the rules if you need to. If somebody comes along who wants to play, and the game that's being played is too hard, too confusing, too violent, too quiet for him to share in the fun, you change the game, or you find a different game, and if some of you still want to play the other game, you play two different games.

That way, the games we play can be competitive or cooperative, simple or complex, very challenging or just plain playful, depending on who wants to play what. That's what was so new about New Games. And, sadly, still is.

The Slanty Line principle

There's an elegant model, called the "Slanty Line" principle, developed by physical educator Muska Mosston[xiv] that puts the concept of individually negotiable challenge very clearly into practice.

If you're a Phys Ed teacher, one of the things you do with kids is help them develop their high-jumping skills. In "non-adaptive" Phys Ed, the way you did this was to hold jumping contests. You'd hang a high bar horizontal to a certain height and everybody would have to take a turn jumping over the high bar. If they succeeded, they'd get to the next round, and the high bar would be raised. The contest would continue until only one person was left, and that person would be lavishly praised as the one who established the high jump record for the class.

The problem with this kind of competitive incentive structure is that the kids who need the most practice are the kids who get to jump the least often. The worse they are at jumping, the sooner they're out of the game.

Make the high bar diagonal instead of parallel to the ground. And let everybody jump over any part of the high bar, and take as many turns as they want. And what do you get?

Instead of the teacher, each kid sets his/her own challenge. The jumpers who are not so good at jumping can still jump across the high bar as many times as anyone else, they just cross at a lower point. And, when they feel the need to increase the challenge, they can just station themselves at a higher part of the high bar.

No one is eliminated. No one is given prizes. Everyone wins. Repeatedly.

Slant the high bar and the authority rolls right out of the hands of the teacher, out of, actually, any one body's hands, into everybody's. The challenge (jump as high as you can, and then jump higher) remains the same, but the challenger has changed. It's not the Phys Ed instructor who increases the challenge, it's the kids, themselves: the kids as a group, and the kids, individually.

A challenge that is determined by the individual player is more complex, because it requires "reflective action." The player must evaluate not only his or her own success, but also the success of the challenge. And even though kids can get very competitive, the challenge is ultimately self-selected, ultimately guided by sheer fun.

Without an external evaluator, each kid can devise and revise the challenge. Of course, evaluation is going on, and whether the competition is inner-directed or outer-directed, the fact is

that the teacher, your fellow jumpers (both higher and lower), your inner referee; somebody is evaluating your performance, challenging you to challenge your self.

Ideally, each kid should be seeking out his/her personal level of flow, driven by the natural desire for complexity into a deeper and healthier engagement with the relationships between the human body and gravity. But, in fact, there's still something about the way the task is framed that draws the kids apart.

Even though nobody's eliminated, even though everyone's free to increase or decrease the challenge, even though you don't even have to take turns, the fact is that the challenge is directed towards the individual. With the focus on individual performance, on how high who jumps; the relationship is fundamentally the same.

And what's worse (or more complex), someone might be attaching meaning to your performance, as if how high you can jump says something about your character!

So, what if we completely redirected the challenge, away from the individual and towards the group? What if the entire class tried to jump holding hands? Or with their arms around each other's shoulders? Or each other's waist?

Shifting the focus of the game away from what they can do individually (ME), we focus, also, on what the kids can do together (WE) – on collective as well as individual performance.

To jump the Slanted Bar together, we need to make sure that each individual kid is going to make it. Even though the challenge is to the group, there are still plenty of challenges to the individual player. Each has to be stationed at the appropriate part of the high bar: too high and you might not get over, too low, you might make it harder for someone else. Each has to be able to ask for help, and provide help. Preparing for the big jump, synchronizing the preparatory, simultaneous squat, each individual is doubly challenged. And yet, not competing. Same slant, same task, but fundamentally shifted experience.

Raising the high bar, you intensify the competitive relationship between the diminishing few. The game, internally and externally, becomes one of increasingly isolated MEs (the "winners") against an increasingly disempowered WE. Slant the High Bar, and the relationship relaxes, becomes supportive, empowering, healthy, ME\WE.

The friendly game

When I think of a "friendly game," I think about a game where, under the right circumstances, you get things like do-overs and even, if necessary, take-backs. And a card laid isn't necessarily a card played. And you can have time-out whenever you need one. And you can change the rules if it makes it easier for everyone to play, or when it looks like it will be more fun for everyone. And if the game isn't fun, you can all just quit and find something more fun to play. Or not.

I think of Scrabble games with rules like:

 you can spell phonetically
 you can spell backwards
 you can rearrange tiles (as long as all the tiles still spell words)
 you can turn a tile over when you need an extra blank
 you can make up your own word as long as you can define it
 transliterations are acceptable
 the goal is to get the highest collective score
 we can trade racks

Or chess where, on your turn, you can

 pass
 move two pieces on a turn
 change the position of any two of your pieces, or maybe just any two pieces
 change sides
 "revolutionary chess" where you can kill the king and keep playing until you don't want
 to play anymore
 play with three players
 how about giveaway chess?

I think of playing solitaire, together. I think of playing poker as if we were playing solitaire together. I think of rules like:

 playing round the corner (you know, J, Q, K, A, 1, 2…)
 allowing sequences of alternating colors; odd, or even, or prime numbers
 with hands face-up (an odd concept, that)
 playing for a specific total (a run is a series of cards whose sum is…)
 swapping hands
 taking two turns at once
 not taking turns at all

Or playing marbles like this.

I think of a friendly game as a game where the only really important thing, the only rules that are either hard or fast or both being that the game is fun for everyone, that everyone can

play or quit, that we don't have to play the game until someone wins, or for money, or even for score. A game with friends that we play because of the friendship.

I mean, honestly, what's a game for? And what's a friendly game really about? What has winning got to do with friendship? Or keeping score? Or playing for money? Unless, of course, it's more fun that way. I ask my self, what kind of friends would want to try to make each other lose? Some kinds, apparently. Not my kinds, though. My kinds are about helping each other have fun.

The evolving game

Some games evolve while you're playing them. They just evolve. You start out playing them one way, and by the time you're half-way through you're playing them a different way, and by the time they're over, they've become something different again – sometimes different enough to be a whole new game.

Of course, they evolve because you let them evolve, because you, in fact, encourage the players to try different ways to play them, just for the fun of it – especially when the way they're playing doesn't seem as fun as it was a few minutes ago.

Rollover evolved. I think that's the only way I can describe it – evolved. We were in a beautiful room at Esalen – a large yurt for dancing and moving around a lot in. And we were sitting on big, everso welcoming pillows. Some of us were lying down.

One of the games I find my self teaching again and again, especially when a group is just starting to form, is a game I called Numbers.

You know this game, Numbers?

OK, I'll explain:

From the Game of Numbers to the Land of Hands

We used to play a game called "Numbers," with some rather bizarre variations, during a New Games Tournament. It's played like this:

Everybody sits in a circle, and counts off, beginning, naturally, with me. I'm Number One.

As Number One, I get to start the round. All I do is call another number. And the only thing the person who has that number does is call another number. And that's how you play the game. Simple?

The challenge

See, if someone actually does make a mistake, that person goes to the end of the circle (to my right and take the last number. And, just as logically, everybody who had a lower number has to move up one number. Which of course means that all those people have a new number to remember. Which of further course means that they are ever so much more likely to make a mistake.

As the game goes on, it also becomes more incumbent on the person who gets called on to respond pretty much immediately. Which of course gives people yet another opportunity to make mistakes, and have to change seats, and numbers, and get more confused.

When new people come in, they get a new number, take up their position at the end of the sequence, and, since people rarely call the last number (what's the point?) they are not really challenged to say or remember anything until someone makes a mistake. And, by that time, they pretty much understand what the game's about.

The object, if there is one, is to get to be Number One, because Number One is the one who gets to start the round. Which means that the lower (closer to One) your number is, the greater the challenge, because the more often your number gets called.

Increasing the challenge

The game stops being so much fun if nobody makes a mistake. So, you make it harder. Decrease the delay tolerance, for example. Especially after a mistake is made and people have to change numbers. My friend Charles Parsons tells me of a variation. He writes: "suppose the mistake-maker's number is removed from the game. E.g. with 10 players: number Six makes a mistake and now becomes Eleven. Now there is no number Six. Everyone must remember this!"

Or, if you have a multilingual group, play it in, for example, Dutch.

Thumper, too

There's an oddly similar game, called "Thumper." Very much like Numbers, actually. Frequently employed as a drinking game, in fact.

Instead of numbers, each player has a unique gesture. Go around the circle and give every one the opportunity to create a gesture (a physical gesture, like batting the eyes, sticking out the tongue, shrugging the shoulders, pointing the finger). Have everybody repeat that player's gesture in a genuine, but futile attempt to memorize each.

The game proceeds as in Numbers. Player Number One starts by making someone else's gesture. That player is then obliged, in the minimal reasonable time, to make some other player's gesture. And on, and on

Once people seem to understand this game, you can play both games, Numbers and Thumper, at the same time.

Names

Who needs numbers? Saying each other's names is more than enough challenge. Especially when the group is "at speed" and you're expected to respond more or less instantly. Odd how many times people find themselves forgetting their own name.

For a little more insanity, try playing it in a handpile, where the person who just got named gets to put his or her hands on top.

Beyond challenge

Or, if you're into bizarre variations and want to make the game a little more threatening and a lot more physical, you can try playing it the New Games way. Everybody gets on the floor and lies on their stomachs. Already more threatening. And, for the more physical part, when you make a mistake you have to roll your body over the backs of the higher Numbers. Last time I introduced that particular variation, we got on the floor all right, but everybody quit before anyone could really get, so to speak, rolling. It's really fun, though. Honest.

Then there's the "official" version of HaHa Numbers. People assume the standard HaHa position with heads on each other's stomachs. Instead of calling out numbers, people say "ha" for number one, "haha" for two, "hahaha" for three, etc. Just watching this game I laughed maybe harder than I've ever laughed in my veritable life!

Side note

This art – adapting to the players and the moment – is what makes the evolving game evolve, and is key to everything I teach about teaching games.

Meanwhile, back to Rollover.

But first, a little further back, to a children's game called Who Stole the Cookie from the Cook-cookie Jar.

There are several reasons the Cookie Jar game might remind you of Numbers: you sit in a circle, you say something that makes someone else have to say something, and if the person who has to say something doesn't say that something else soon enough, that person kind of loses. It's a fun game and a genuine challenge – keeping the rhythm, staying well enough in tune to respond when called, thinking quickly enough to decide whom else to call. However, in the Cookie Jar game everybody has to keep a rhythm, you have to call people by their name, and if you miss, you're out.

It evolved into Numbers because I wanted it to. First of all, I wanted everyone who wanted to play to be able to play, always. Then, I realized that, especially for beginning groups, and even more especially for me, it's just too much of a challenge to remember everyone's name. Finally, learning a rhyme and keeping rhythm was a challenge that proved, for my purposes, despite the fun of it, not quite inviting enough. Maybe it was because I was playing with adults.

So, instead of names, we used numbers (a lot easier than remembering names), as one does in some variations of the game Priest of the Parish, (a.k.a. The Prince of Paris – go figure, and closely related to a game called Big Booty, which we shall not address herein) which I somehow learned as "who sir, me sir?" And instead of using a song or a rhythm, even, we just made it the rule that you couldn't take too long to respond. And then, instead of losing when you miss, you just moved down to the end, taking the last number. That particular rule – the changing your number to the last number – makes everyone below your original number have to change their number as well, which adds significantly to conceptual delight and chaos, which is the way my friend learned how to play The Prince of Wales, not to mention (which I am about to do) Whales Tales.

Meanwhile, back at Numbers [which was the game we started out playing, the variation of some other game that either e- or de-volved into a game where you sit in a circle, everyone has a different number, the number one player calls any other number, the player with that number calls any other number, and the player who doesn't respond in a manner which we deem sufficiently timely (always a question of deeming, and, given the level of compassion at the time, which varies accordingly) moving to the end of the line (even though we play it in

a circle) and assumes the last number, etc.]. So we were sitting down on these pillows, some of us lying on the pillows rather than sitting as abovementioned, and then some others also wanted to lie similarly down, until, at some point, drawn by the apparent comfort of it all, it became the thing to do, lie down, that is. And, of course, once we were all lying down, when someone made a mistake and had to change position in the circle, it seemed logical, and proved much funnier, for us to roll into the new order of things.

And it was fun. And we gave it a name. And we played it again. And we saw that it was good.

Hence, Rollover.

Meanwhile, Handland:

So we reached a hiatus with the rolling and the overness. It was fun. We were fun. And we were also tired. So, for one of those reasons that require deeper inquiry than we wish to inquire into, we decided, all together, to roll over. Just once. Not over each other. But just over, from lying on our stomachs to lying on our backs. And for some other inexplicable reason, we sidled towards each other until we found our selves, heads together, ear-to-ear, like spokes in a wheel. And one of us started humming, which is something that lying ear-to-ear seems to make you want to do. Which led all of us to start humming. And then a couple of us raised our hands up, just kind of swaying and dancing to the tuneless tune we were humming into being.

And a few others joined in, and we couldn't but help note the weirdness of all those hands in the air, apparently without owners, like separate beings.

So we let our hands get to know each other. Kind of like puppets. Like maybe snake puppets or dragons or fish or swans maybe. And our hands started talking to each other, and greeting each other and loving each other and celebrating that we found each other in Handland together.

Games and playfulness

Here's a thought to think about: most games don't encourage playfulness. Unless you're talking about the kinds of games kids play. Well, some games. Some kids. Maybe little kids. When they aren't involved in Little League, or toddler tennis or baby bowling.

If by games you mean sports, or games with official rules, or traditional games like shuffleboard and chess and bridge; playfulness is not what you'd think of as happening very much. Maybe between games. But not during, not when you're all focused and keeping score and things. Play is happening. O, yes. Sometimes even deep play, play of the immersive, transcendent, just-about-heroic kind might even be happening. But not playfulness.

"To be serious," Carse[xv] says, "is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for unlimited possibility."

"Specified conclusion," as in: winning or losing, as in keeping score and getting trophies and having official rules and officializing and spectating. "Unlimited possibility" as in doodling and dabbling and making art and playing around and mucking about and wandering and wondering and embracing the otherness of the other and the aliveness of life and having fun for the sheer fun of it all.

Of games and players

One thing you learn from playing with children - especially the very young - is that the fun you are having together is more important than the game you are playing. This is equally apparent when you play with the very old. What good is it to win if it makes the other person not want to play with you anymore? Or if it makes the other player cry? Or get angry? Sure, you can blame it on their immaturity (or post maturity), but, still, if your goal is to play together, the game has to end with your being together. In fact, that's how you have to measure the success of the game - the more together you are at the end of the game, the better the game.

This is less apparent when you play with your peers. You tend to think of the game as being the ultimate arbiter of your relationship: "Let the best man win" and all that. When, of course, neither the game, nor your relationship has anything to do with who is the best person. Both, in fact, the game and your relationship are about your being better, together. Not better than each other. Better with.

On the other hand, for the sake of the game, we have to play as if one of us, or one team of us, will prove to be better than the other. It's called "winning." To make winning seem as important and meaningful as we possibly can - again for the sake of the game - we add officials and official rules, trophies and prizes, records and world standings. It makes the game seem more real (when we know it's nowhere as real as we are), more significant (when we know we're far more significant than a game could ever be), more permanent (when we know that neither the game nor any of us can last forever).

So, again for the sake of the game, we play as if it's not just a game, as if it's in fact more real, more significant, more permanent than we are. Which is fine. And fun. Unless we're playing with people who are much younger or older than we are. Because what they have to teach, all over again, is that when it comes to games, the people who are playing are more important. If it's not fun, change the rules, change the goals or the way you keep score or the number of pieces you get or the number of players you have on your team or where you play it or how long you play or what side you're on. Or try a different game.

Sometimes, this is a very hard lesson. Because we want to make the game as real as we can. And we forget who we're playing with or why. And we hurt each other. But as difficult as it is, it's probably the most important lesson we can learn from playing with the elderly and youngerly. It's the reason we need to be playing with them whenever we can. To be reminded what playing with others is all about, what the daily game is there for. Because otherwise, we forget. And the games get too important. And we play too hard. And we break.

Cooperative games

There are basically at least two different kinds of cooperative games. There are probably seven, for all I know right now. But two kinds seems to be a good enough place to start. There are your endless games, like catch, that go on and on and on and then on again until everyone else gets too tired or bored or antsy to play. Then there are your ending games, like Prui and The Lap Game and Knots, where everybody tries to do something together (join the Prui, sit on each other's lap, get untangled). And, o, wait, there are cooperative games that don't really end, but could – I guess you could call them episodic, like clapping games and jumping games and ball-bouncing games, where as soon as you get good enough to feel like you're succeeding, you make it harder.

So, OK, there are three kinds of cooperative games. You can also play some ball-bouncing games by your self, don't you know. But then you're not cooperating, unless you're cooperating with the ball, which you probably are, even though the ball might not be interested in cooperating with you. But that's not the point. Or, at least, that's not my point.

My point is that there are probably three kinds of cooperative games, and regardless of how many there are, I really just wanted to think with you about one game in particular: "playing catch." Which could be called "playing toss," but it's not. It might as well be called juggling, because that's pretty much what you're trying to do, except there's only one ball. But it's the same idea – keep it going back and forth for as long as you possibly can.

There are a lot of things you can play catch with. There are baseballs and footballs and Wiffle balls and beach balls and balloons and bubbles (those games tend to be very short). And ping pong balls and volley balls, which you usually don't really catch, but you do something very much like it, cooperatively speaking, by trying to, well, volley the ball back and forth, ad, conceptually-speaking, infinitum.

So, let's say we're not playing catch. We're volleying. Playing ping pong. But not for score. Just volleying.

Actually, you could say that this is a fourth kind of cooperative game, different from the others in that it was based on a competitive game. But that's not the point nor particularly relevant given the observation that playing cooperatively, without score, for no other reason than playing to keep playing, can lead to an experience that is as profound and transforming as the best moment of any game you can think of, cooperative or competitive, game or sport or contest, in pursuit of fun or beauty or knowledge or power.

Sooner or later, all "keeping it going" kinds of cooperative games end. Or at least get interrupted. Usually because somebody misses.

So, there we are, throwing the ball back and forth, and we're, well, kinda good at it. Back and forth and back and forth with nary a miss at all. After awhile, despite our collective brilliance and our desire to go on and on for as close to ever as possible, we get, well, a little, shall we say, bored by all that brilliant nariness. So, we increase the distance between us, or slightly change the way were throwing or the way we're catching.

Something gets changed, by purpose or accident. You step back to catch the ball, and you stay there. And maybe next time you miss, but you don't move any closer. You still think it can be done. Until you miss and miss again. And then, maybe, you take a step closer. Until it gets too easy.

It's a game of balance, of fine tuning, adjustment, constant adjustment – adjusting to each other, to the changing levels of fatigue or energy, changes in the sunlight, temperature. At the same time there is this desire to perform and reach and share the spectacular. To go just beyond your limits. To return the throw with an accuracy that surprises both of you. To dive, to leap, to dance, not just in harmony, but with splendor. Something unsaid between us urging us forward towards the promise of something beyond us, the achievement of something extraordinary. Until, the inevitable befalls us, and we miss, and miss again.

In truth, it's often very difficult to determine which of us actually missed. Maybe the thrower didn't throw quite as brilliantly. Maybe the catcher wasn't totally present, if you know what I mean.

We've made it a rule that you're not allowed to say "sorry" when that happens, because: 1) stuff like that sometimes just happens, and 2) how do you know it's your fault? how do you know the other guy didn't return the ball the way he should have? what makes you so sure you were the one? and 3) it doesn't help. What helps is to pick up the ball and keep going. Unless you don't want to. Or the other guy doesn't want to. On the other hand, saying things like "sorry," even when you don't actually entirely mean it, is something people do to keep the game going. On the order of saying "OK, so let's pretend that last one didn't really happen." Or saying "that doesn't count." Or saying "that's a 'do-over'."

Better to admit that we need to change something about the way we're playing. We can change the distance between us, we can change the way we're catching or the way we're throwing.

Or maybe the best change of all is to play some other game, a different game. It might be more fun, next time, if we added more people. Well, maybe not more fun. Maybe as fun. Fun again. Fun in a different way. Maybe if the three of us, or five of us, or ten of us can keep it going long enough, maybe even more thoroughly, more powerfully, deeply fun.

Group Juggling

When you get lots of people playing catch together, or volleying together, things tend to get more game-like, more organized, with rules, even. So a simple game of catch becomes something like a feat of group juggling. Which reminds me of a game I learned too long ago to remember who taught it to me. A near-perfect example of a cooperative, game-like experience, of the apparently endless variety. A game, coincidentally called "Group Juggling." Which explains why I was reminded of it.

You're going to need a lot of things to throw around. Like jugglers do. Preferably things that are as easy to catch as they are to throw. Nerf balls. Balls made out of rolled-up socks or plastic shopping bags. I really like the sock solution best because it makes my collecting singleton socks such an admirably practical activity.

You need a few fewer balls than players.

We've evolved I guess what you might call a ritual to start the game – especially with people who haven't played it before.

Somebody acts in the role of "Ball Captain." No, you don't have to call your self Ball Captain. Nor does anybody else have to. It's just that you happen to have all the balls. And happen to be the person who winds-up explaining the game. And sure, it'd be best if everyone were the captain of their own ball. But, if, like I said, nobody else knows how to play, it's best, like I also said, if one person has all the balls.

So, there's everybody, standing in a circle. And the Ball Captain asks everyone to raise a hand, and explains thus: "I'm going to throw the ball to somebody. Somebody not too close to me, and not too far, either. When you catch the ball (which I sorely hope you do), you, of course, first put your hand down so you can catch the ball, and then throw the ball to someone else who has their hand up – someone not too close or too far from you, who then lowers her hand to catch the ball, throws the ball to someone else who's not too close or too far but still has a hand up, and on and on, always throwing the ball to a person with a hand up, until no-one has a hand up. At that time, throw the ball back to me."

So now the ball has made a complete, if somewhat difficult-to-trace circuit, everyone having thrown the ball to one person and received it from someone else. As a final, and mildly amusing memory aid, the Ball Captain asks everyone to point, simultaneously, to the person to whom they threw the ball, and then, with the other hand, equally simultaneously, the person from whom they received the ball, further vivifying the path that the ball achieved.

Post-finally, the Ball Captain starts the game by throwing the first ball to the person to whom she had originally thrown the ball to, um, first.

During the first and subsequent rounds, the inevitable ball-dropping event usually evits itself. This is a good opportunity for adjusting player position – closer to the center, or perhaps to some other part of the circle. Later, as more balls are added, ball-dropping is no longer the game-stopper it once was. Often, it provides a welcome opportunity for reducing the number of balls in circulation. In any event, I always recommend that the focus is on how to adjust positions, if need be, rather than on ball-handling skills, or lack thereof.

After the ball has made a complete circuit or two, depending on how long it takes everyone to catch and throw without confusion or ball-dropping, the ball captain, deeply sensitive to the flow of the game and the confluence of the group, introduces another ball, bringing into stark and oft-hilarious focus the "juggling" nature of the game. And on and on and so forth, introducing yet another ball and yet another, letting missed balls fall where they may, until the group reaches such a state of mutual astonishment that they fairly curdle in collective awe.

And then, in full knowledge that the possibilities for further juggling marvels still abound; totally cognizant of how possible it would in deed be for people to, for example, start walking in a circle whilst juggling, or perhaps even to change places, perhaps even with the very person to whom the ball is being thrown or from whom received; in total recognition of the endless hilarity still to come; the Ball Captain, recognizing that the only thing standing in the way of the game becoming one of historical, or perhaps hysterical significance, stops the game, distributes the balls so that there's more or less one for each and every player who wishes to ascend to semi-captaincy. And then lets the game begin again — each player introducing another ball at the most precisely opportune moment so that both juggle-worthy surprise and conceptual delight are maintained.

Of course, there are still more variations, should more be sought. There's the possibility of creating yet another ball route, the equal possibility of using both routes simultaneously, of changing directions for one of the routes, of singing, of doing the juggling whilst collectively pursuing both the Hokey and the Pokey… Left to their own resources (which is always a good idea), people will always be able to come up with more ideas to make the game more, shall we say, challenging. The recommendation here is to try these ideas one at a time, on a first mentioned, first endeavored basis.

Knots

The last two games were cooperative games of the endless variety – games that can just go on and on and on and also on until everyone is clearly ready to play something else. We now turn our collective attention to the contemplation of cooperative games of yet another variety – games that have a goal. Specifically, this time, a game called "knots" or "human knots" or "tangle" or, for that matter "untangle." You need a bunch of people – a bunch being perhaps as few as say five and as many as maybe twenty. You gather together in a configuration mildly approximating a circle, standing somewhat shoulder to shoulder, facing, obviously, in, towards each other.

Everyone extends one hand towards the center of the circle, and selects a hand to hold on to. Clasp hands. Shake hands if need be. But do, by all means, hold on. If you find your self having accidentally clasped an immediately adjacent hand, de-clasp and find another, non-adjacent hand. Having accomplished this with sufficient aplomb, everyone then does with the other hand precisely like that which everyone did previously, except, as I implied, with the other hand – extending the aforementioned hand towards the center, seeking another hand to clasp, but this time making sure that the hand being clasped belongs to a person with whom you are not already clasping hands. Thus, each person finds him or herself holding on to two different, non-adjacent people, arms tangled in the attempt to stay connected to the clearly knot-like hand-tangle, having thus achieved the beginning point.

The end-point is to reach a state of mutual disentanglement similar to that of the starting point, without, of course, letting go of either of the hands to which your hands are temporarily affixed.

It is wise, before the deknotting becomes too devoted, to explain that people should maintain a loose, but continuous contact with the other hands – loose enough so that they don't twist each other's hands off (an enthusiasm dampener if ever there was one) in pursuit of collective knotlessness.

There comes a time, in fact, there can come several times of apparent unsolvability. 1) Sometimes, it is only apparently unsolvable, and, with a little deeper analysis and collective effort, extrication is at hand. 2) Sometimes a solution appears, but in unexpected form: you find your selves in two intersecting or totally separate circles. 3) Sometimes it is solved, but

certain participants refuse to accept the solution because some are facing in and others out. 4) Sometimes it is actually unsolvable. Should any of conditions 2-4 manifest, it behooves one to introduce the concept of minimal cheating. In this event, all attempts to de-knot are suspended, and the group, collectively, examines the entire knot in search for the one hand-clasp which, if temporarily de-clasped and then re-clasped elsewhere, would most likely result in group unknotting.

Dylan McKenzie, NYU Game Center

On the other hand, sometimes it's best to give up and try again.

One more thing: should you find your self with a group larger than 9 but less than 21, you can create a double knot. Ask players, before knotting, to find a partner. Partners now put one hand around each other's waist. This gives each pair two hands free – a left, and remarkably, a right hand – exactly enough for them to play as if they were one person, and pursue the game precisely as abovedescribed.

And yes, should further complexity prove desirable, Knots can, at least purportedly, be played with eyes closed.

So, even though the game has a fixed endpoint, at least in theory, it isn't that fixed. The challenge can be increased or decreased, just like we can increase or decrease the challenge when we're playing catch or group juggling. In fact, it's a lot easier to make a game more challenging than less. Often, almost too easy. And when it gets too challenging, well, it just isn't fun any more. Is it?

Playing any cooperative game is an exercise in sensitivity: sensitivity to each other, to what's fun for you, to the fun you are sharing, to the game you are playing together, the rules you're playing by, the place your playing in, the objects and bodies you are playing with. It's that sensitivity, shared, that makes it, and keeps it fun.

People Pass

There's yet another kind of cooperative game, typified by the iconic New Game of People Pass, in which a group of people work together to transport each other, one at a time, from the beginning to the end of a line. This is one of a large collection of what became known as trust games - often for a very good reason. These games were most often developed by people involved in what was called T-Groups or "sensitivity training," the objectives of which were often a little more hidden from the participants than they might wish.

Played for fun, these games can be wonderful, as I hinted at, "transporting" experiences of caring and being cared for, of support and supporting, of somewhat intimately sensuous sensitivity – all for the sheer joy of it. Played for other purposes, like teaching people about their "true nature" and stuff, these same games can take on a bit too much intimacy.

To keep these games fun, you have to focus heavily on individual safety, and the freedom to quit without consequences, and with impunity. If it's your turn to get carried over everyone's head, and you aren't sure you really want to, it's just fine. It doesn't say anything about you. It doesn't mean anything about your character or caring or feeling about the group or sense of responsibility to the group or who you really are. Would you mind, however, staying in line and helping to pass other people overhead?

People Pass, properly facilitated, is great fun, for everyone. Players start out in two lines. From then on, the people in front, one at a time, are carried to the back of the line, where they position themselves so they will be ready to carry the next person. Facilitators usually station themselves at the front and back of the lines, to help the people being passed so they can easily climb on to the front of the column and safely off the back. It's good to have a third facilitator, especially in large groups, to walk the proverbial line with the person being passed, just to keep things comfortable and safe.

To keep the people who are doing the passing sensitive to the person being passed (sometimes, they get carried away, so to speak), you might want to ask them to hum or chant or whisper sweet nothings. The passee, aside from worrying about being dropped, might also spend a lot of her time worrying, more rightfully, about being touched, as they say, "inappropriately." Again, to keep the game fun for everyone, you might need to spend some time focusing the passers' attention on how to keep the game fun, and help the passee feel safe.

There are many ways to play the game. You can play standing up or lying down. Lying down feels safer for everyone. And, since the passee knows that if the passers aren't taking appropriate care, she may very well land on their faces, there is an added sense of safety – at least for the person who most needs it.

You can pass big people, little people, people with disabilities, and they all get to feel loved, and so do you. All in all, at its best, an experience of a playful path.

Sensing and sensitivity are key to this kind of cooperation. They form the background assumptions for all cooperative games, but in games of the People Pass ilk they are more self-evident. For these games to be fun, players need to be sensitive to each other, and, especially when playing with strangers and/or teens, the people who are facilitating the game have to help make sure that that sensitivity is maintained throughout the game.

As, not necessarily, but often manifestly contrasted with crowdsurfing.

All games are cooperative

Each game we described represents a particular type of cooperative game, some more profoundly cooperative than others. None of the games focus on winning or losing. In none of the games do people keep score. No one is ever out. The only reason to play them, the only reward, is fun, is having fun, together.

The fact is, every game is at some very basic level cooperative, whether you keep score or not. There are rules, conventions, understandings, agreements that have to be maintained throughout the game, or the game doesn't work, no matter who, if anyone, wins.

Many of the games I call "Playful" can also be called cooperative, others border on being competitive. The one thing that they all have in common is that no one keeps score, or if anyone does keep score, no one really cares. Because the one thing, the one goal that transcends all others is to have fun, together.

This is true of all the games described in this book, of all the games I advocate, teach, demonstrate. They are all for fun. They're all for having fun together. You can play anything for fun. You can play baseball, football, hockey, you can even wrestle for fun.

It's a different way of playing, apparently. But it's just as natural, just as satisfying as any other way to play – whether you play for score or for money or national standing. All this talk about cooperative games is useful, because it highlights a certain kind of game. But the truth is it doesn't matter what kind of game you're playing when you're playing for fun, together.

The fact is, every game is at some very basic level cooperative, whether you keep score or not. There are rules, conventions, understandings, agreements that have to be maintained throughout the game, or the game doesn't work, no matter who, if anyone, wins.

The one thing that they all have in common is that no one keeps score, or if anyone does keep score, no one really cares.

On being IT

Take tag, for example.

Depending on which version of tag you're playing (and they are legion, these tag versions), you either want to be IT, or you don't want to be IT.

When you're IT, and you don't want to be IT, you have to make someone else be IT, and the only way you can do that, is by, eponymously, tagging someone.

And then you're not IT, and someone else is, so you run away.

So the question, then, is "if tag is a game" (which it certainly is) "how do you win?"

And the answer?

Well, it seems you don't really quite exactly win. The game just goes on and on. You're either one of the many, running away from IT, or IT, running after the many.

Sure, when you're IT you can go after one or several people in particular, for whatever reason you can give your self: revenge, friendship, vindication. And if you manage to tag them, it's almost like winning. Except, when you succeed, all that happens is that person becomes IT, and they get they're turn at revenge, or demonstration of friendship, or whatever. You still don't win. And neither do they. And when you're not IT you can look at every moment of your not-IT-ness as a personal victory. But, sooner or later, you'll be caught. And if you're not, it's almost like you lose, because the only real object of the game is the fun you have playing, and after a while, being not IT is just not fun enough.

If being IT is winning, then why are you trying so hard to make someone else IT? If being NOT-IT is losing, then why are you running away?

Because it's fun.

And if it's not fun enough because, for example, IT doesn't stay IT long enough, you make rules like "no tagging back." Or, if people are getting too tired or not tired enough you change the size of the play area, or you declare certain places "off limits" or "safe" or "home." You're not changing the game. It's still tag. But you're fine-tuning it, because it's yours, because it's for fun.

So many ways to play tag: freeze tag and circle tag and cat and mouse tag and ball tag and

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hospital tag. You'd think there'd be a point to it, a way to keep score, to win.

Which reminds me…