Funny Games

"...for the truth will make you laugh"
- the Oaqui

Football players don't laugh much. At least the professional ones don't. You could say the same thing about most of the people who play professional sports. Generally speaking, these people aren't playing for laughs. Nor can the way they are playing be characterized as "playful."

The games that are most helpful for those of us who wish to travel a more playful path are the games that we play for fun. The games that make us laugh. The funny games.

Everybody's IT Freeze Tag

So here's this game. It's a tag game. Except everybody's IT. Momentarily.

To start the game, you decide on where the boundaries are, because everybody has to stay inside of them. Then you spread out so there's ample running room inside of the boundaries. And then somebody says "start" (or something of that ilk). And, since everybody's IT, everybody runs after everybody else, tagging anybody.

If you get tagged, you're frozen. Just before you freeze, you kneel, or get on one knee, or sit down.

And you remain that way until the game is over, which is perfectly fine because the game takes maybe three minutes.

The last person standing is the winner. Except usually what that person does is start another round, as close to immediately after as immediately after can happen.

And if it takes too long, you make the boundaries smaller. And if it doesn't take long enough, you make them wider.

Round after round, whoopin' and hollerin' each other into exhaustion, and nobody really cares who wins because as long as you keep playing, everybody wins, because it's fun.

Which says something else about winning: just because somebody wins, it doesn't mean the game is over.

Hug Tag

Somebody's IT. Maybe even several somebodies. Everyone else isn't. If you get tagged, then you're IT.

There are two ways to keep from getting tagged: run very, very fast for a very long time; or hug someone. Because this kind of tag is called Hug Tag. And as long as you're hugging someone, you're safe (if safety means that you can't get tagged).

Before you start playing, you can decide, together, how many people are IT and how many people you have to be hugging in order to stay, so to speak, safe.

It's fun to stay safe, because you get to hug and be hugged. Which makes you try to find the people you want to be hugging with, even if it's only for the moment. On the other hand, it's also fun to run around. So, after a while, your fun-focused players will stop hugging each other, just for the, well, fun of it.

People who are new to the game might miss that part – the "stop hugging when it stops being fun" part - because it's not a rule, as a rule, it's just what you do. So, if needed, you can make it a rule. Like "you can only stay hugging as long as you can sing a note without taking a breath."

Sometimes you need rules like this. And this one is especially good, because it's kind of easy to cheat, if you have to. Especially if someone in your hugging group is singing really loudly.

O, yes, the hugging group, that's another rule you can make. You can decide how many people have to be hugging in order attain the status of safehood. If all you need is one other person, it gets maybe a little too easy for the NOT-ITs to stay NOT-IT, and probably a little too, shall we say "challenging" for the IT(s). If there's a specific hug-number, then it's a little harder for the unhugging NOT-IT to find that specific number of fellow NOT-ITs. And when hugging, and reaching the agreed-upon limit of acceptable breath-duration, especially when a not-yet-hugging NOT-IT is breathing over your conceptual shoulders, the game breaks up into another moment of shared hysteria when everybody in the hug has to find another group. And if you make yet another rule stipulating that you can't hug someone you've just been hugging with, well then all the more merry mayhem.

None of these rules is essential to the game. Their only purpose is to keep the game fun. Usually, someone suggests a new rule, or a way to change an existing rule. And, if it's a well-timed suggestion, there's no further discussion, unless people feel it'd be more fun to talk about how to change the game than to continue playing it. Which might be the case, de-

pending on how tired everyone is.

Because the players decide which rules to change or add, and when, Hug Tag becomes a player-made game, even though it didn't start that way. Probably, the next time they play, they'll play the way they liked it best last time. And it'll stay that way, as long as it continues to be fun.

Roshambo

Then there's Roshambo, for another example, or, as more commonly known, Rock, Paper, Scissors, a.k.a. Paper, Rock, Scissors, etc. It has nothing to do with Tag. But it tells us a little more about winning and losing.

Paper beats rock, rock beats scissors and scissors beats paper. You'd think that playing is all about beating, about choosing the symbol that beats the other guy's. So you play once. And it's over. And either you win or the other guy does. And then you can go on. Except that it's so quick, so decisive that you don't have enough time to feel the fun of it. So you play it again and again, keeping, more or less, score. Which turns out to be more fun, because then you think it's all about outsmarting, even though it probably isn't. You try to think like the other guy, or, thinking that the other guy is trying to think like you, you try to choose the one thing you wouldn't choose to do if it were you choosing. And on and on and over and over again – best two out of three, four out of seven, and, OK, five out of nine. And you'd think it's ultimately impossible to predict, given the circularity and infinity of the regression, until you meet someone who seems to win almost all the time.

And even though it's what they call a zero-sum, and if-somebody-wins-the-other-guy-loses, ultimately competitive kind of game – you are always agreeing, in a way, making sure that you manifest your choice at the same time, absolutely together; renegotiating how many times you have to play before you can decide anything about anyone, losing- or winning-wise.

It's not a win-and-it's-over kind of game. It's a play-again-and-again kind. It's not a win-because-I'm-smarter kind of winning, or win-because-I'm-better, but a win-because-I-know-you kind.

And what if you make it the objective to tie instead of to beat someone? What if every time you tie you hug each other, and every time you don't, you throw again? Same game, right? Still Rock-Scissors-Paper, yes?

And yes, you can make the game more complicated. There's Rock-Scissors-Paper-Lizard-Spock, for example. There's even a way to play Rock-Scissors-Paper in teams. Several ways.

El Hombre, El Tigre, Y El Fusil

I first learned of this game from an organization called the Eastern Cooperative Recreation School[xvi]. It's a game of Rock-Scissors-Paper, for two teams. Each team acts as a single person. They meet, separately, and decide what symbol they want to display. In this case, they can choose to be "El Hombre" (the man), "El Tigre" (the tiger), or "El Fusil" (the gun). The gun shoots the tiger. The man controls the gun. And the Tiger kills the man. If they tie, neither team wins.

Much of the fun of the game comes from making the decision (secretly, attempting to outguess the other team), acting it out (being the man, the tiger or the gun), and seeing which team won. The game should be played in several rounds.

As I continued to teach the game, I, of course, continued to modify it to make it into the kind of game that would give people access to the kind of fun I most wanted to share – infinitely playful, loving fun.

I started playing it with three teams instead of two. This way, there were more opportunities to be "strategic." It was less confrontational than the two-team version. And there were two ways to tie (if all teams chose the same symbol, or all teams chose a different symbol) – adding yet another opportunity for tension and laughter.

I then decided that instead of keeping score, the losing team (or teams) would lose a player to the winning team. So, the players changed teams, and allegiances as the game progressed, which invited them to identify with the entire community rather than any particular team, and also de-emphasized winning. Thus, the game of Panther-Person-Porcupine.

Next, I made it the rule that when all teams chose the same symbol, they would hug each other, patting each other on the backs and saying something endearing to each other. Again, emphasizing community, lightheartedness, and playfulness. If all three teams chose a different symbol, one player from each team would change teams.

Finally, instead of starting with predetermined symbols, I would invite the players to invite each symbol, its pose, and whatever noise it would make. This increased their sense of ownership over the game.

Rock-Scissors-Paper Tag

Which brings us, inexorably, to Rock-Paper-Scissors Tag, core to the New Games games repertoire. It's tag. It's Rock-Scissors-Paper. But it's played between teams. And if you're caught you don't really lose. Instead, as in my version of Tiger, Man, Gun, you become part of the winning team. And, in theory, at least, it's not over until everyone has won.

So there are two teams. And three lines marked on the ground. One line is in the middle, the other lines are about, what, 20 feet on either side of the middle line. They could probably be only 10 feet apart. Or 50, if you wanted to run a lot.

The space behind the end lines (maybe another 5-10 feet wide) is Home for each team.

So, you go to your Home and you meet, you and your team, while the other people, and their team, are meeting in their Home. And together, quietly, so the other team can't hear, perhaps even surreptitiously, so the other team can't even see you, you decide what sign you're going to throw, all together, all the same sign, at the same time. And when you're ready, you march up to the center line and make noises of confidence and victory-preparedness.

Dylan McKenzie, NYU Game Center

When both teams assemble, they line up, facing each other. At a mutually agreed-upon signal, each team in unison and both teams together do their Rock-Paper-Scissors thing.

Yes, it's possible that both teams throw the same symbol. In that case, it's a tie. And when that happens, just for the, you know, fun of it, again as in my version of Tiger, Man, Gun, both teams hug, patting each other on the back while whispering sweet nothings.

On the other hand, if they don't tie, one of the teams wins. And everybody in that team, without further ado, races across the middle line and tries to tag as many people from the other team as they can while everybody in the losing team flees screamingly across their Home line.

As players take their positions in line, each player has the opportunity to decide precisely how close to the opposing player she wishes to stand. If it turns out that she a) throws the winning symbol, and b) is closer enough to the opposing player, she c) stands a very good chance to catch and tag the opponent before he can turn and flee. If, on the other hand, she a) throws the losing symbol, and b) stands far enough away from her opponent, she optimizes her chance to escape untagged. And then there's a) standing close to the opponent and b) throwing the losing symbol

There is just enough space for each player to determine how much risk to take. You can play safe and stand at a distance from your opponent. You can play aggressively, increasing the likelihood of your being able to tag the opponent, while, at the same time, if, by chance, you haven't thrown the winning symbol, increasing the likelihood that you'll get tagged.

At this moment, the moment immediately after the revelation of the chosen symbol, and just prior to the running and screaming, there ensues a chaos of such absurd proportion that something similar to hilarity ensues. The victors are often as surprised at their victory as the temporarily defeated are at their temporary defeat. Hence, for a brief moment, you find your self running away, screaming fearfully, when you should be running towards, yelling menacingly.

As mentioned previously, anyone caught joins the winning team for the next round, so, like what's the deal? You lose, you win.

And on and on, decision-by-decision, the game continues until everyone is on the same side. As mentioned also previously, this end-state is theoretical. But it's a conceptually lovely end-state, this idea that we'd all ultimately end up where we started – all on the same side.

Something That Beats Something Else That Beats Something Else That Beats Something

Yes, it's Panther, Person, Porcupine again. Only not.

You play it with as many people as you want to. I first played it with more than 100 people, but that's neither here nor there.

So, everybody stands up and gets in groups of three or more relatively immediately adjacent people. Together, they decide on three somethings. Each something makes a noise and a gesture (as in the aforementioned Panther, Person, Porcupine – but they can be anything, e.g.: flute, toaster, chicken coop). So, now that they've chosen their somethings and the gesture and sound for each, they decide what something beats what something else, as in the more traditional game of Scissors/Paper/Rock (a.k.a. Rock/Paper/Scissors).

They are then ready to play the game. First, they meet (in the case of more than two players) and decide what they will be. Then they count off and simultaneously manifest their choices. If they tie, they hug and pat each other on the backs making sounds of "isn't that sweet."

And then they play again.

In the case of more than two teams, you have yet another opportunity to hug and make sweet sounds when everyone happens to choose the same or different something to be.

Many and multiple are the delights of this variation of the variation. It's fun. You can keep score, but it's basically pointless. It's like something else.

Of Spoons And War

After dinner with my son and his wife and me and mine and my daughter and her then candidate…

It started out as the straightforward game of Spoons.

You know the straightforward game of spoons?

You place a bunch of spoons in the center of the table (ofttimes one fewer spoons than spoon-grabbers) arranging them in easy-grabbing distance from any player. You deal everybody four cards. And then the dealer starts pulling cards from the deck, one at a time. Whatever card the dealer doesn't want is passed to the next player, and the next. Each player taking and discarding, always leaving only four cards in their hand. As soon as someone gets four-of-a-kind, that person, and everyone else, grabs a spoon. Until then, while everybody's try to collect four cards of the same kind, what you really try to do is to remember to grab a spoon when it's spoon-grabbing time, because the only way to lose is if you don't have a spoon, and there's no particular way to win, actually.

Well, it wasn't that straightforward of a Spoons game, actually. We didn't have any cards. So we had to use rummy tiles instead. You know rummy tiles. Like playing cards morphed into mah-johg tiles, two decks of cards, actually.

And it all turned out to be at least as amusing as if we had been playing with cards, passing and arranging tiles and trying to keep track of the ones going out and the ones coming in, and then the suddenly well-timed spoon-grab. All very jolly.

For a while. Several rounds, at least.

And then for some reason we men divided the tiles into three piles. And each of us, as if in response to a genetically cellular call, began to build forts out of our tiles. We men, that is. As our forts got more intricate, the women became more otherly engaged.

And just as our forts were near completion, we suddenly knew exactly what to do with the remaining tiles: Slide them into each other's forts. Carom loose tiles into the enemy's towers. And, when all else finally fails, launch them. Toss them. Drop them. Catapult them.

Oh, we learned a lot about fort construction that evening. The tall and the imaginative do not survive. Only the short, the thick, the ugly.

And when those fail, grab as many tiles as you can. And then grab each other's. Continue until there are no free tiles. And then build new forts, under the table, behind chairs, in the living room. And don't worry. Nobody really dies from laughing.

Prui?

I introduced this game to the New Games Foundation back in the 70s. It rapidly became part of the New Games repertoire and was featured in the first *New Games Book*. I thought I found it in a book on children's games around the world. I haven't been able to find it since. It might have been transmitted to me by the great Prui, him- or herself.

Here's how to play:

Clear the dance floor (living room, kitchen, back yard). Get more or less everyone together. (For any game to be fun, participation has to be optional).

When the mass is about as critical as it will get, choose someone to start the game. Everyone closes their eyes and starts milling around. In the mean time, the game starter secretly appoints someone to be Prui.

Dylan McKenzie, NYU Game Center

When people bump into each other, they shake hands, while saying “Prui” (pronounced “proo-ee”). If the person they encounter is not Prui, they each go off to find someone else. On the other hand (as it were) when someone bumps into the actual, pre-appointed Prui, shakes hands and says prui, the Prui shakes hands, doesn’t say anything, and doesn’t let go.

Now both people are Prui, remaining Prui until the end of the game. If either of them is encountered by anyone else, more people are added to the collective Prui. The game continues until more or less everyone has become Prui. Then, at a signal from the pre-selected Prui appointer (who has her eyes open during the game so she can help steer people away from miscellaneous environmental hazards) lets people know that they can at last open their eyes.

There are some exceptionally fun moments as more and more people feel their way towards Pruiness. It gets quieter and quieter. The plaintive sounds of the unPruied few mingling with the invisibly giggling many.

This is a light-hearted, and loving game that you can play several times during the evening, and it will get better each time.

Like all good games, it is, at its core, profound. Wandering around in the dark, seeking the touch of another human being, joining, being joined, becoming one, waiting in silence for those who are still lost to find you. Waiting for the silence of oneness, completion, peace. A life’s journey, which, should it ever end, ends in laughter.

May we each find the Prui!

A What?

The game A What is traditionally played as follows:

Players are sitting in a circle. One player, who has two objects that she has named, starts the game. She passes one object to the left, engaging in the traditional "a what" exchange.

Player A turns to player B and says "I give you a "frabjous" (or whatever else player A decided to call one of her objects). Player B then turns back to player A, hands the frabjous back, and says "a what?" Player A then returns the frabjous back to B and again says "a frabjous." Upon which B takes the object from A, saying "O, a frabjous!"

B then turns to C, saying "I give you a frabjous. C then turns to B and asks "a what?"

And B, as if struck by sudden amnesia, passes the frabjous back to A, and asks "a what?"

A, turning B-wards, says, once again, "a frabjous." B, now reminded, turns C-wards, and says "a frabjous." C, taking the frabjous from B, then says "O, a frabjous."

C now turns to D, handing D the frabjous, saying "I give you a frabjous." D, of course, turns back to C, and asks "a what?" C then hands the frabjous back to B, again asking "a what?" B then gives the frabjous to A, also with the "a what" question. A turns to B, returning the frabjous to B, saying "a frabjous" B then to C, also with the frabjous. D then exclaims "O, a frabjous!" And then turns to E, saying "I give you a frabjous."

Each time the frabjous is passed, the "a what" has to go all the way back to the person who named the object, and all the way back to the person who is now receiving the object. Once the first object has been started, the object-originating player launches the second object in the opposite direction. All is orderly, in a playful kind of way, until one player gets both objects, and much hilarity ensues. When I played it in Israel, in Hebrew, the frabjous became a "Me" (which, in Hebrew, means "who"), the second object "Moo," and the Hebrew word for "what" just happened to be Ma - creating a "Me, Moo, Ma" kind of thing) and even more madness ensued.

There is, however, another A What. This one even sillier and, if possible, more fun. In this version, nobody gets laughed at/with because they find themselves confused and bemused. Instead, everyone is bemused and confused at the same time.

Again, everybody sits in a circle. This time, they each have a thing in their hand (anything, really: a shoe, a set of keys, a piece of candy) and have given their thing a name (any name,

really: a Fred, a Pizza, a Furblik).

When the game starts, everyone turns to the person on their right, and says "I give you a…." ("…." being the name they decided to give their thing).

For example, let's call one person "Person Number One" and the person to Person Number One's right "Person Number Two." And let's say that Person Number One has named her thing "Furblik" and Person Number Two has named his thing "Gumdrop."

Person #1 simply turns to person #2 and says "I give you a Furblik," while, at the same time, Person #2 has turned to the person on his right, saying "I give you a Gumdrop," while #3 is telling #4 "I give you a Schnitzel," and on and on.

If you think about, it would seem that if everybody is so focused on telling somebody else what their thing is called, nobody would be able to hear what anybody is telling them. And you'd be almost exactly right.

Which almost explains why everyone then turns back to the person on their left, and says "a what?" (Person #3 saying "a what" to person #2 who is saying "a what" to Person #1). And then, almost immediately, the people who named the thing then turn back to the people on their right and say: "a "…" (Our friend #1 saying "a Furblik" to #2 while #2 is saying Gumdrop to #3 who is saying Schnitzel to #4 who is saying something else to #5 and on and on and also on).

This is repeated three times, and on the third time, everyone finally gives their thing to the people on the right, who must, upon receiving the thing, even though in all likelihood they have close to no idea what anyone said to anyone, say "Oh, a …!" (the "…" being whatever they think they actually heard the thing being called).

The goal, purportedly, is to pass all the objects completely around the circle, without changing the name originally ascribed to them. The actuality is that it is nothing short of miraculous when any of the objects retain their name.

There is a recommended technique. If you were, for the sake of argument, person #2, and were addressing person #3, telling that person what your what is called, you would be, at the same time, leaning towards person #1, hoping that, despite the relative impossibility of it all, you might actually, by the third time, have heard what that person said.

These are both wonderful games. Wonderfully, deeply fun. Genuinely funny. But as funny as they are, as much laughter as they produce, there's something deeply familiar here, and often not so funny. Something that reaches into the heart of communication, education, training.

In the first version, there's this guy with the What. The rules stipulate that only the What guy really knows what's What. You have to keep on referring back to him. And if that's not confusing enough, the What guy's talking about two completely different Whats. And if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you have too much information to process, you don't know which way to go, which person to say What to.

This is very familiar. Familiar to anyone in the clergy, or the pews, the office or the classroom. Despite the efforts of the establishment, the teaching gets separated from the teacher, the vision gets separated, the spirit gets separated, the meaning separated, and all that is left is confusion. Because we're just playing, the confusion is what makes it so much fun. When we're not playing, it's not so much.

In the second, everyone has a What, everyone's trying to tell the next guy what to call the What, except that What was given to them by someone else who was trying, at the same time she was telling you about the What she was giving you, to figure out what the What she was getting from the other person was supposed to be called.

I think they call this crowdsourcing.

The fun also rises

Fun is our most important product. Well, maybe not our most important. But the pursuit of fun, and the invention of new ways to have it, has been something we've done on a personal, family, tribal and national level throughout our history (and pre-history, probably, too).

Since Greece and Rome, sports have reflected the nations that nurture them. Wrestling, track and field, baseball, football, rugby, tennis, golf, competitive sailing and the like model societal norms, holding the promise of great wealth, honors, and dominance for the fortunate few. Despite the ubiquity of basketball courts, football and baseball fields, even in the poorest neighborhoods, and the promise that even the poorest can become superstars, the truth is what it has been for practically ever – spectators vastly outnumber players.

The parallels between sports, government, military and banking are too many to disassociate one from the other. All, despite claims of inclusivity, are played and officiated by an elite minority. Spectators and citizens have, for the most part, only indirect influence on outcomes, and even less of the benefits.

In the early 70s, I had the privilege to be part of a "movement" called "New Games." It was started by a few people who were, at the time, the seeds of what became, for at least two decades, a new culture (notably, Stewart Brand, editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and George Leonard, author of *The Ultimate Athlete*) – one that manifested itself through public celebrations of community. We played games like the Lap Game, where thousands of people stood in a giant circle, turned 90-degrees, and sat on each other's laps, and People Pass where people lovingly carried each other from one end of the line to the other. Or Knots, where people made a knot out of each other's joined hands, and tried to figure out how to untie themselves.

The New Games Tournaments were playful, creative and inclusive, where the only rules were "play fair, play hard, nobody hurt." And, as such, they were also profoundly political. They manifested an alternative that was diametrically opposed to the dominant culture. There were no spectators, only players. There were many games, played simultaneously, that anybody could join or quit, and no one game or player was any more important than any other. There was music and art and invitations to play at any level for any age with any ability.

The New Games movement eventually spread across the globe. It changed, adapted, and its influence can still be found in youth programs throughout the world. For these children, New Games is a collection of fun activities that make them feel better about themselves and each other.

For much of contemporary culture, the New Games message remains more a reminder than an influencer – a moving, joyful reminder of what we are capable of, and what we have forgotten. The closest equivalent we have to the gentle delight of People Pass is the chaotic and often dangerous frenzy of Crowd Surfing. Fortunately, there are those who are still listening to the New Games message, and even more fortunately, some of those who are listening are in positions of cultural influence.

One such group has led to the creation and presentation of what has become known as "pervasive games" – play events that bridge virtual and physical realities, that build the groundwork for the emergence of play communities without boundaries: political, geographical, intellectual, economic, social, and physical.

Pervasive games build on the emergence of the iGeneration – of whole connected cultures, where people in buses and on trains, in public squares and office lobbies and hallways, engage with their personal, invisible community, pausing to take a photo and mark their physical trail in a boundless virtual playground. Pervasive games engage participants in computer augmented physical encounters that are dominated, not by technology, but by the spirit of fun and community.

Others are performance artists, using technology to coordinate and direct what has become called "flash mobs," public celebrations of playful creativity in public spaces. Dances, operas, parades in grocery stores and train stations, shopping malls and subways. Like New Games, they are creating events that dissolve the distance between public and performer, providing intimacy and access, sharing delight for delight's sake.

Still others are exploring the iPad and iPod as a medium for new forms of interpersonal play. Fingle[xvii] for example, is a kind of Twister game for fingers played on the iPad. Or Johann Sebastian Joust[xviii] a game demonstrating a computer/human interface that engages whole-body, social interaction.

Finding precedents in what we once called "New Games," people are creating Newer Games, newer and ever more relevant manifestations of what New Games, and its many precedents, also renewed: the spirit of play, the celebration of community, the restoration of faith in our common humanity.

My point? The deep fun, the real fun, the renewing fun, the fun that makes us new to our selves and each other, the fun that can become for us a spiritual path - it's always there, not, maybe, mainstream, but there in the tributaries, near the edges, off the beaten path, in the liminal spaces between, now in the shadows, now, briefly, in the light, but always near, and with the dawning of each new day, the fun also rises.