

Fun

**“In the beginning it was fun.
In the end, it was all for fun.
And in between is where it tickles most.”**

-The Oaqui

“I don’t need to talk about serious games, and gamification, and how games build bodies and teams and minds and make you endorphinful. I think that fun is enough. I think that if we have fun, allow our selves to have fun, to define what is fun is for us, we don’t need to have another purpose. Fun itself is a guide to live fully in life; to bring your whole self into the world.”

Fun, of course, is everywhere you look for it, outside, inside, all around. Granted, sometimes you have to look a little harder. But it’s there, always, wherever you are.

You don’t have to go on a vacation to find it, you don’t have to buy anything, or go anywhere, or prove your self worthy, or win anything or pay anything. You just have to step outside and give your self to it. And then let it take you.

I’m not saying remembering is easy. I’m not saying letting your self have fun is easy, either. But fun? Fun is easy.

Finding Fun

Fun is wherever you are, in whatever you are doing or sensing or thinking. It's between you and the person you're with, or the machine you're using, or the table you're sitting at, or the path you're walking down, or the things you and your self are pretending into being. It's not something to strive for. But something to melt into, to sink into, to open up to. Listen. You can almost hear the laughter. Breathe. You can almost taste the joy. Listen a little more closely. Breathe a little more deeply. And there it is again. Fun. Real fun. Deep, forever fun.

So, look, I'm sorry if all these essays about how important fun is, and how many games there are to play and learn and how you can learn to lead games and how you can help other people have more fun and stuff and things – I'm sorry if I somehow gave you the impression that fun is one of those things you have to study (though studying fun can be great fun) or teach (same with teaching fun) or coach people in (ditto with the fun potential).

Fun isn't the hard thing. The hard thing is letting your self out to play. Even when you spend your lifesavings on something you think will be the most fun you've ever had or will have, you stay inside and think about how much more fun it will be when you land, how much more fun it will be when you finally unpack, and how much more fun than that it will be when you finally get back home. Or you start believing that you're not supposed to have fun, maybe because someone told you, that you have to earn it, or deserve it, or get wise enough or enlightened enough or have sacrificed enough or been good enough.

No, no, no. I say again, no. Fun is easy. It's the most natural feeling there is. It's life. It's living. It's being a being. Don't let me or anyone else make you think other. Letting your self out to play might be hard. Believing that it's really OK, that people will actually want you to have fun might be hard. But fun? Fun is easy.

Fun is more important than winning

Early in my explorations of play, I observed that people have a different way of playing games that they have themselves designed or modified. They would play with the game as much as play the game itself. They would play with the game together, as a shared thing, that somehow managed to take precedence over who won or who lost, who was the better competitor, who was more or less able.

It was especially evident in games played in informal settings, like backyards, streets, vacant lots (as so beautifully described by Iona and Peter Opie^{xxvi}) where the choice of game, and the interpretation of rules, would always be in response to the environment, materials at hand, different skills and changing play preferences of players. Bases would be moved, boundaries redrawn; when things didn't seem fair, players could rely on the semi-magical power of playground law, shouting out things like "interference," "time out," "no cutting," "do over" or "no takebacks." Here, in the States, this kind of game became known as Street Games. Played during the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s, in streets and vacant lots, informally, with sticks and aluminum-foil balls, these games created and nurtured the urban community.

Much later on, I came to characterize this kind of game play as "playful."

Playful behavior in games is especially evident when everyone involved in the game had some influence over the way the game was being played, or at least over the person who was leading the game at the time. As the influence is removed, the game formalized, the nature of the play experience also changes, becoming markedly less playful, more competitive, less responsive to individual differences and far more determined by the success or failure of one's participation in the game.

It seems to me that this less formal, more playful way of playing was not only more fun, but often more compassionate, responsive, creative, supportive.

In the 1970s, I had the opportunity to be part of what became an International movement whose purpose was to exemplify and advocate that kind of informal, supportive, player-controlled, playful play. It was called "New Games^{xxvii}." Most people experienced New Games as a collection of games, many of which were cooperative, humorous, creative. Some could involve hundreds, even thousands of players. From our behind-the-scenes perspective, New Games was not only a collection of games, but a method of play leadership and organization. We were playing with large, diverse crowds. People of all ages and abilities, who came together for all kinds of purposes – for the games, the socialization, relaxation, the playfulness, the freedom. Deciding what game to teach, when, with whom; explaining and starting the game before people got tired of listening to us, helping people play, keeping people safe,

knowing when to start a new game somewhere else, knowing what game to start, knowing what particular version of the game to introduce, keeping a balance of games (active, quiet, large, small, creative, competitive), keeping it fun, keeping it inviting to people who were just watching, changing the rules when things weren't as fun as they should be – all this was central to the success of the games.

The people who led New Games were not “officials.” They didn't keep score, they didn't decide what was fair. They did what they could to keep the game fun. We wound up calling them “referees.”

Central to the success of leading New Games was the transfer of the responsibility for keeping the games going from the leaders to the players. The giving over of control and responsibility was the true test of effective leadership, and the heart of the experience of New Games. They were accomplished not by a set of rules or procedures, but through playfulness. And it was that playfulness that kept New Games new.

This kind of leadership was almost invisible to the players. In part, because the leaders would often join the game, as players, helping the game become more fun by the very way they played it. In fact, the less noticeable they were the more effective it became.

As a body of games, New Games proved very successful. Many of the games have become part of elementary school physical education programs in countries throughout the world. The games that have remained “new” in spirit are those that are the most creative or cooperative. Those that have proven more successful in penetrating the culture, at least on college campuses, like Ultimate Frisbee, have struggled endlessly to incorporate the kind of playful leadership that was the “spirit of the game” into the ways in which the game is actually played.

Ultimately, it was the style of leadership that kept New Games new.

In many ways, the purpose, concept and leadership of New Games were all influenced by the experience of informal play, informal games, informal sports. In other words, New Games, at its most successful, reintroduced the concept of playfulness to organized community celebrations, leading to the creation of play communities in which fun became more important than winning.

Fun is at the heart of things

Fun is at the heart of things – of things like family, marriage, happiness, peace, community, health; things like science and art, math and literature; like thinking and imagining, inventing and pretending.

Fun is not in the wrapping, but in the unwrapping; not in the skill, but in the practice; not in the frame, the design of the package, the goal, the purpose, the reward. They each may lead us to the heart of things, may invite us, encourage us, tease us. But they are not where the fun is.

Play and playfulness, in all their various manifestations (laughter, fascination, delight, spontaneity, wonder, openness, exuberance), resonates to the beat of the fun within. It is the way in and out.

You can't really make anything fun that isn't already fun. The fun of work is what happens during the experience of working. The fun of art happens during the making of art. The fun of science is in the doing of science. A game can't make work or art or science fun. Nor can a toy or a joke or a playful costume. In playing with a toy, though, we can sometimes touch, and be touched by the fun at the heart of science or work or art. A toy can let us touch the pulse of wonder that drives the scientist, the builder, the performer to do her work. A game can lead us to feel the breath of the life-bringing joy that the mathematician finds in the dance of numbers, the artist in the play of color.

The fun is there, at the very heart of things. It is not ours to create. It is ours to discover.

The laws of fun

Let's divide everything we do into two categories:

- 1.0 The things we have to do
- 2.0 The things we want to do

Over-simplistically speaking, fun is why we want to do the things we want to do.

Sometimes, all too rarely, if you ask me, the things we have to do and the things we want to do are the same. Then the fun we have can get very deep, in deed. Often, those of us who pursue the playful path deem the merging of 1.0 with 2.0 our personal apotheosis.

Now, let's divide the things we want to do (2.0) into two more categories:

- 2.1 The things we want to do because they will lead us to the things we really want to do
- 2.2 The things we want to do because we O so really want to do them

The things of the 2.1 variety are often endorsed by social and cultural forces of great purport. Frequently, they come in the guise of jobs and community service and good citizenship and generally all require what the psychologists understand as the ability to "delay gratification."

These other things (2.2) are what we do for fun, what we think of, what we mean when we say "fun." We're not talking about awards or rewards. Just doing them is all we ask. Just experiencing them. Just feeling them. Jumping in them. Lying in them. Rolling in them.

Sometimes, also all too rarely, the things that we want to do because they lead us to the things we really want to do (2.1) are also fun (2.0). They may not be as much fun as what we really want to do, but they are more fun than the things we really have to do (1.0). Like joking around with strangers in the dentist office. Or trying to meditate while the dentist is getting the needle ready. These things, whilst not exemplifying the sheer delights of fun of the 2.2 variety, often characterize the more mature approach to the fun available to the more, shall we say, mature.

Deep fun

Sometimes we forget. But at one time or another, one of the things that drew each of us to getting involved with whatever work we do is that we thought it was going to be fun of the deep kind. I'll get to why we forget in a moment. But first, I'd like to acknowledge the fun thing. That it's in fact why we're still here. Each of us. Because we want to have fun. Because we want to share fun. Because we want to create the opportunity for fun. For our selves. For as many people as we can reach. For all playkind.

The thing about fun is that most of the time we never really know we're having it until we're not. So usually we can only tell when something was fun. And then we forget about it. Unless it was really fun, so much fun that it was unforgettable. That's what I call "deep fun." It's like what other people call being in "flow," only deeper. I like to think of deep fun as those times when we get totally present. When we are exactly where we most want to be. Every aspect of our selves – mind, heart, muscles, breath, senses – is completely engaged. Involved. Not because we make our selves be present. But because we totally, absolutely, entirely want to be doing what we're doing, in this place, in this moment, in this body. Because we are wholly, completely, exactly where we want to be. And then we find our selves beyond.

The experience of deep fun is a spiritual thing. It speaks of the times when we become gifted, when everything we experience is a gift – the day, the people, the ability to experience. When every word we can manage to form is a word of gratitude, praise.

Fun, happiness, joy, bliss

When you have fun, you're happy. When you're deeply happy, you're joyful, joyously. When you're truly, deeply, and profoundly joyful, you reach a state of bliss.

Joy and bliss are experiences that you can get religious about and for. Happiness, not so much. Fun, not at all.

Joy is overwhelming fun – fun so big that it overflows your mind, heart, body – as if all of life and love were spilling into you and you were spilling out.

Fun, happiness and joy are part of the daily game. The winning part. Bliss, you're not playing any more. Or you're playing some other game all together. The game of life, perhaps. All of life. Death, too.

Fun, happiness, joy, bliss – things of the spirit. Each is a reflection of the others. Fun an intimation of joy, happiness of bliss. Fun, just a little easier to find, to reach, to grasp, and, when necessary, to let go.

The Fun Assumption

Suppose you supposed that the only reason birds sing was the sheer fun of singing, of having songs and the ability to give them voice. Or the fun of discovering themselves suddenly landing on a moving branch in a swaying tree in perfect balance. Or the fun of knowing that whenever the wind or whim took them, they could take off, and fly.

Suppose you supposed that the only reason you laugh is because it's fun to laugh. Not because of the endorphins or the health benefits. But only because of the fun. Only because it's more fun than you can contain.

Suppose the same about squirrels scampering around and inside of trees, or bees buzzing or flowers flowering.

Then every bird you hear, every squirrel or bee or flower you saw would be an invitation to have fun, too. To share the fun. To celebrate the fun.

Suppose we just assume that it's all for fun, all about fun.

Scientifically, the fun assumption could be shown for what it is. But assuming the birds sing to claim territory? What makes that assumption any more relevant or insightful or useful than the fun assumption? Assuming the squirrels are fighting over potential mates, the bees struggling to be first to sip the nectar, the flowers' only purpose propagation? What makes those assumptions any more valid than the fun one?

Why not, really, why not fun?

Becoming Gifted

On my way to work I stop my car, and look.

It's dawn, and the full moon is setting, the light more intricate than I could possibly describe, more real than you could possibly imagine.

And I actually ask my self:

"Why now?"

"Why such wide beauty?"

"Why such an especially glorious present?"

"Why such a gracious gift?"

Or is it really always so? Is such grace really always given?

And is it just that I suddenly have become gifted enough to perceive this moment of light, gifted enough to receive this moment's present?

And

"Who, exactly, is the Giver?"

I ask my self, stunning my self with theocentric implications.

And

"What really is being given?"

I ask my self again, slapping my self with scientific significances.

And

"Who am I that I suddenly get to receive all this?"

The moon pales in the breaking day.

"Why ask?"

I ask.