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THE WELL-PLAYED GAME

A PLAYER'S PHILOSOPHY

The word “well” embraces the qualities of what we consider to be a state of excellence and health. Knowing that something is done well is an appreciation of the excellence of the deed as well as the excellence of the doer. The fact that we use the word “well” also to indicate a state of excellent health—that we can feel well—only enhances the wholeness that this word describes.

Playing Well

When we are playing well, we are at our best. We are fully engaged, totally present, and yet, at the same time, we are only playing.

The Well-Played Game

is a game that becomes excellent because of the way it’s being played.

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Searching for the Well-Played Game

If we are going to find a well-played game together, we are going to have to arrive at some common understanding of what it is we are looking for.

The most logical way to go about it is by playing together. Since we are playing together, we will have something in common. When we find the game that we can play well together, we’ll all know what it is.

We’ll also learn what it isn’t. We’ll be disappointed, sometimes. But if we are all disappointed together, then we’ll also know that we are, at least, looking for the same thing.

But we’re not even sure what games we should start off with. We’re feeling reluctant. What if the game we pick is really disappointing? What if we never find the right game? How much disappointment can we take before we start getting disappointed in each other?

So, let’s go watch a game. We can be more objective then. Then, if it never gets well-played, we can still talk about it without feeling that maybe it was our fault that the game was so bad.

We go to watch a “professional” game. It’s *Us* against *Them*. Since we’re all for the same team, at least the score won’t make us wind up hating each other.

Here we are, in the stadium. It's a beautiful day. And what a stadium! A veritable multimillion-dollar testimony to the value of the well-played game!

We really want to see a well-played game. So does everybody else. We want to see this game unfold. We want to see the accomplishment of excellence—not by any one individual, not even by any particular team, but by both teams, composed of people who are in such a state of physical and mental and spiritual well-being that they are making fantastic plays, unbelievable volleys, catches that leap up and amaze us, feats of grace and power. . . . Really, that's what we all want to see.

At first, as we watch the game begin, we're excited. We have a premonition of excellence. It feels good witnessing this coordination of players, this professional ease as they take their positions.

As the game continues, we are indeed amazed. Something, some kind of excellence is already making itself felt. That was a good hit. Nice play for our team. Did you see the grace of that throw?

We're jumping up and down now, screaming for Us. Yes, that's the kind of excitement we're looking for.

After a while we seem to be jumping down more than we're jumping up. The score's 12–0 and it isn't even halftime yet. All right, yay and all that, our team is winning. But the other team. . . .

They seem to be out of it altogether. They're not even competing. They're hardly in the ballpark, so to speak.

Should we stay, out of curiosity, at least? But the game is getting boring. Our team seems to be losing its spirit too. It's too easy for them. We might as well leave now and avoid the crowds.

So, what did we find out?

We did see some moments of excellence, some really good plays. These are the things that happen in a well-played game—like that throw, the spectacular catch, that run. When something exceptional happened, something unexpectedly right—like the player running between instead of around. And that amazing, mid-air turn she did when she caught it! Yes, that's part of what a well-played game is: doing things that are unexpectedly right. And the way our team anticipated that play—that was nice, that kind of presence is part of what a well-played game is.

But this wasn't a well-played game, actually. The game itself wasn't well-played. We were disappointed, even though our team wiped the other team out. The other team disappointed us so much, they were in such poor shape, were playing so poorly. There was no challenge. No opportunity to make the whole game excellent. Even our team got bored and sloppy and stopped caring—though they won, though they accomplished what they were getting paid to accomplish, our team was bummed out.

This tells us more about what we consider a well-played game to be. Playing well has to be a general state. It can't be confined to any one team or any one player if we are to have a well-played game.

How about a little game of Ping-Pong? Ping-Pong's my game, you know. Well, I'm not that good in it all the time, but I have played it well.

Should we volley first? Just so we can get used to the game again.

Yeah, I like the way it's beginning to feel, don't you?

Want to volley for serve? Well, I mean, as long as we're trying to figure out what a well-played game is, we might as well make a game out of this.

All right! Nice shot! I'm really surprised how well I'm playing today. Sorry, I thought it was my serve. Now it's starting to feel good. Good slam. How about that for a return?

Look at this. I'm playing faster than I can think. I didn't even catch myself deciding to hit the ball there, I just did it. I'm playing out of pure presence, almost—just happening to be there, exactly where I should be, just happening to hit back to you exactly where I should be hitting. And look at you! Returning everything I try—even my fanciest, my shots I reserve for only the stiffest of competition.

Now do you know what a well-played game is? Sure, I won and all that, but even so, you have to admit it was well-played, it was what we were looking for.

Why are you looking at me that way?

Oh.

You were playing with your wrong hand.

How nice of you to consider my feelings, I think. You're right, I didn't know you were on the intergalactic team. It was only fair that you handicap yourself somehow. Made the game even, right?

So then it wasn't a well-played game after all, was it? No. Sure, I'm sure that, playing with your wrong hand and all, you were playing as best you could.

I guess you're right. It was a well-played game. All right. All right. It fits the description. Yes, we shared excellence.

But my win! My win! You took away my win!

See, I thought I was really beating you. I mean, playing you at your best and still winning. I mean, I thought, because I was beating you, that I was better than I thought I was. Truth is, you were a lot better than I thought you were. Yes, I'm better than you when you're using the wrong hand. But what does that prove?

You could have told me that you were playing with your wrong hand before we started the game, you know. If you had told me then, then at least I wouldn't feel so stupid now.

Well, I guess, yes, it was in fact a well-played game. We both played well together.

Winning doesn't prove anything, does it? One of us had to win—we knew that as soon as we agreed to play for score.

Strange, though, the way I feel cheated. I know that it really doesn't matter who wins the game—at least that's the understanding that we have reached together—so why do I feel it was unfair of you not to let me know ahead of time that you were playing with the wrong hand?

What occurs to me now is that this search for a well-played game is already a radical departure from what we do, as adults, when we play games together.

Normally, the only common intention that we have been able to establish with each other is that we have each wanted to win. Though we have been playing games together, the only effort in which we are usually united, the only accomplishment that we have all been able to validate, is winning.

It is clear to me, now, that the result of such a union is separation, always separation. It divides us into winners and losers, those who have achieved and those who have failed. The division then leads us into further division. It becomes difficult, now that some of us have won and some of us have lost, to find a game that we are all willing to play well together. It was never our focus at all. Though what we have always cherished most is the game in which we are playing well together, winning takes precedence.

It is also clear that the old values are still too strong for me to play with. As contrary as they may be to the purpose we have evolved, their hold is too strong. I thought that I could prove something—to myself, to you—by winning. You understood what we had to do in order to find a well-played game, I didn't.

What we prove by playing well together is the fact that we can do it. We want to play well together.

It is a difficult thing to remember. Some of us, like me, get too easily confused.

Any victory, now that we know what it is that we want to create together, is shared. No matter who wins a game, if we have played well together, we have accomplished what we set out to do. That victory is not determined by who wins, nor by what game we play, but rather by the *quality* of playing that we have been able to create together.

In other words, it's not the game that decides who among us plays well, nor is it winning the game that determines success.

Our success in the search for the well-played game can only be measured in terms of how well we have been able to play together. Either we achieve it together or we don't achieve it at all. It is not measured by the score, it is not measured by the game, it is measured by those of us who are playing it.

This is indeed a new thing for us. It is strange that it should be that new. It is strange that we would ever allow a game or a score to evaluate how well we've been able to play together—strange that we have ever allowed our authority to reside in anything other than ourselves. It is strange that this notion of a well-played game can be something with which we are so deeply familiar, and yet something that we can so easily become confused about. How did it happen that I ever allowed myself to believe that winning the game was a more meaningful victory than my enjoyment of how we were playing together?

How about another game of Ping-Pong?

Look, I've got an idea. Let's not play for score this time. Let's just volley. Maybe then we'll be able to see more clearly when we are playing well together. Maybe then we'll be less distracted.

No, I'm not saying that playing for score is bad or anything. I'm simply admitting that, based on our last experience, it isn't very helpful.

And I've got another idea. Since you're a better player than I am, suppose you play to my backhand more. I'm better with my backhand, see, and if it's all right with you, I think it'll help us get to a well-played game together. Maybe you should keep playing with your wrong hand, too.

Yeah, this feels good. It's becoming like a meditation, just volleying back and forth like this, just trying to keep the ball on the table.

The game has really changed, though, hasn't it? I mean, we're not trying to make each other miss anymore. When my shot hit the end of the table just then, and you missed it, I was disappointed more than anything else. I wanted us to be able to keep the ball in play, that's all.

You aren't getting bored, are you? I admit that I'm not giving you very much of a challenge. I mean, we're playing so gently with each other.

Whoops! I didn't expect that. It seemed that the ball had lost its equilibrium a little. I had to step pretty far back to get it on the table again. It felt good, though.

Yes, this is starting to feel right—like we're really playing together. Maybe if I played a little farther back. . . . Well, I guess that was a little too far. From here, maybe. Yeah, that feels good.

Did you see that shot? I really didn't expect I'd be able to get it back on the table at all.

You can feel it too, can't you? Even though you're so much better at the game than I am, you can feel how we're beginning to play this game well between us, can't you?

Nice shot! I really didn't think we'd be able to save that one.

I said "we" didn't I? Yes, I'm beginning to feel how both of us are making this game happen. I mean, it was always true that we

made the game happen together. I couldn't be playing Ping-Pong with you if you weren't playing with me. But now I can really feel how we're playing *together*.

Do you realize that we haven't dropped the ball for quite a while? We seem to be getting the feel of it. How long has it been? You're kidding! We've been doing this for an hour already? We've kept it going all that time?

This is amazing! I can feel the equilibrium shift and restore itself. I can't tell which one of us is making it happen. But I feel so sensitive—I can sense the game, I can sense you, I can sense the way we're playing it together. And I love it. I love being this way. I love doing this thing, playing this game with you.

You feel it too, don't you? No, I don't need to ask. I can tell. I see it in your eyes, in the easy way you're holding your paddle. I can see you smile at the same thing. Whenever there's a moment of excellence, whenever one of us has to stretch beyond in order to keep the game going, we can both tell when it happens.

And each time it happens, that particular experience of excellence, it seems to happen a little more obviously. We seem to be getting better at playing well together. We can feel it now. We know what it is. It's no longer an idea, it's what we're actually doing with each other. And because we know what it is so intimately, we seem to be able to stay there longer.

Yes, we've found it. We are playing well together. The game itself has become well-played.

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Guidelines

We have accomplished much in a very short time: We have been able to arrive at a common understanding of what it is we are trying to do with each other.

We have discovered that our most reliable source of information on the meaning of a well-played game is not in what we win or lose, or even in what games we play, but in the manner in which we are able to play them together.

We have established criteria—critical points by which we can evaluate the games we play: Is this the kind of game we're looking for? Can we play this particular game well together? Is this kind of playing the kind of playing we're trying to make happen?

In so doing, we have come up with certain guidelines, certain methods that we can use to help us find what we are looking for.

The Establishment of the Intention of Playing Well Together

It took us quite some time and effort to decide that playing well together was in fact more important to us that what game we played or whether or not any one of us was able to win it.

We discovered that our agreement to look for a well-played game

wasn't enough—that the intention of playing well together is something we have to be able to re-establish, constantly, whenever we feel it necessary.

So far, it doesn't seem that this intention is the sort of thing that can be established once and for all. Our needs shift. Our understanding changes. We get involved in part of a game and forget what it is we're trying to do with it.

The Willingness to Play

When we finally found our well-played game, we were taken by surprise. We didn't expect it to happen the way it did.

The reason we found it at all was that we were willing to let it happen.

We were each willing to play. We were each willing to play that particular game. We were each willing to play with each other. We arrived at a well-played game because of the way we combined with the game. It isn't something that we made happen. It happened because we wanted it to happen and we were willing to do whatever we could to allow it to become.

On the other hand, it has already happened to us that, though we were willing to play and we had done what we could to establish the intention to play well, the game didn't work for us. If that failure had resulted in our losing our willingness to play, we would have never discovered a well-played game until that willingness was recovered.

Safety

We need, in order to be willing to be willing, some guarantee, somewhere, that no matter what happens in our pursuit of the well-played game, we will not be risking more than we are prepared to risk. Even though I'm aware that I might die as a result of trying to climb this mountain with you, I can accept that as part of the game, part of the challenge. On the other hand, when I discover that you're cutting my rope so that you can get to the top first, I find myself much less willing to play.

So, even though this willingness thing seems to be a prerequisite for our discovery of the well-played game, willingness, pure and simple, isn't enough.

We need to feel safe within the game we want to play well together.

Trust

The safer we feel in the game we're playing, the more willing we are to play it.

But, for this experience of safety, we can't rely solely on the game. We must also be able to believe that we are safe with each other.

Familiarity

In order to trust each other at all, we need to establish some basis of familiarity.

If we haven't played with each other before, we are not familiar enough to be sure of each other.

If we are playing a game that we are all familiar with, chances are that through playing the game together we will be able to establish some minimal basis of trust.

As we play with different people, we discover that there are

variations of the games we have become familiar with. If we are familiar enough with our game, if we are really interested in sharing play with others, we can play the variation without losing the sense of safety that this familiarity provides. On the other hand, there are hundreds of games and tens of variations for each—more than we could ever hope to become truly familiar with.

Conventions

If we can standardize certain aspects of all the games we play, we will extend our basis for familiarity.

Rules such as taking turns, playing fair, playing the game through to the end, good sportsmanship, are all conventions—derivations from different episodes of play, general rules which allow us to arrive at an even broader standardization.

Violating a convention usually results in a stiffer penalty than violating any particular rule of a game.

By establishing the intention to play well together we have begun to create a new convention. We would like it to be understood that the search for the well-played game is what has brought us together. We would like to make this agreement clear enough between us so that we can assume it to be inviolable.

3

The Play Community

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

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

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

When children play together, in the street or the back lot, they too establish a play community. When someone gets hurt, the game stops. When there's a little kid around, you watch out for him, you

play softer when you're near him, you give the kid a break. At all times there is an acceptance of a shared responsibility for the safety of those with whom you play.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As we begin to sense our power to create our own conventions, as we discover that the authority for determining whether or not a particular game is suitable resides not in the game but in the play community, we are willing, even, to change the very conventions that unite us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So it comes back to your basic willingness. But now it seems that willingness generates more willingness—that what at first we weren't willing to do we find ourselves seeking out. We become

willing to do something that we didn't even feel like doing. We even suspend judgment about whether or not we'll like doing something until the time that we find ourselves doing it. We even suspend our fear and prejudice about the people we're playing with. And all this started when we began looking for a game we could play well together. All this evolved when we realized that the people we are playing with are as important as the game we are playing with them —easily as important.

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

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

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

4

Keeping It Going

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

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

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

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

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

Thus, we got better.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In order to do this, I also have to make clear to you that my offer of help is not a strategy. I have to establish the fact that my hint is coming from outside my desire for personal gain in the game itself —that I'm offering the hint in the attempt to make the game more enjoyable for both of us. In experiencing your struggles, I'm experiencing my own discomfort with my role. I want to make sure

that nothing is interfering with our opportunity to play this game well together—not even the game.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children have a terrible time when they try to give hints to adults.

What appears to the child as a devilishly subtle clue more often than not becomes for the adult a dead giveaway. In order to give a good hint, we must be able to understand how the other person is thinking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Well-Played Guessing Game

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

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

How the second player gets that information is what makes one guessing game different from another. This simply means that the

kinds of clues that are permissible determine the kind of guessing game we are playing.

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

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

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

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

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

Fairness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Young children don't really understand the idea of winning and losing. It is another convention which, though introduced quite early

into the children's play communities, acts more as a divisive than a unifying force. To a young child, a game is a source of fascination. If there is such a thing as winning, and winning is to be considered such a wonderful experience, then, whoever is playing should win.

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

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

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

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

Cheating

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A case in point:

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

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

would be out of the game unless he or she really wanted to be.

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

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

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

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

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

Everybody stood around and laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Well-Timed Cheat

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

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

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

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

well. It is a way to change a game so that we can keep on playing.

Boundaries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Occasionally it happens that I have a need to attend to, the satisfaction of which lies outside of the game. I do not wish to draw particular attention to this need. I merely wish to leave until I can refresh myself in whatever way I need to experience refreshment. Knowing that I can cross the line, whenever I have to, helps me and everyone else know that, as long as I'm inside, I'm there to play.

Bases and Safe Zones

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time Out

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

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

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

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

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

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

Interference

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

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

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

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

Getting Involved

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We need *the law*.

The Fair Witness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No matter how many auxiliary roles we create—timekeepers, scorekeepers, announcers, cheerleaders—we must find a way to

return them all to the play community, to reaffirm their membership and establish some kind of assurance that these people in fact represent our community.

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

Clarity

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Practice Game

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

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

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

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

In fact, our guiding principles might have nothing to do with kindness or caring. We might not at all be concerned with making sure that everyone is feeling happy. We are not necessarily playing for personal motives, be they kind or cruel. We are going through all

this because we want to play well together, and we know that we can't really play well unless all the players understand the rules.

Spectators

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Coach

So, we appoint a coach. It is the coach's responsibility to help us maintain our focus on the game. I know that my mom's watching the game. I know that my girlfriend is expecting me to rise to some act of heroism. The pressure is just too strong for me. The spectacular things I try to do are spectacularly stupid. I'm hogging the ball. I'm refusing to let go of my chance for stardom. I'm just about ruining the game for my team.

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

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

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

When I'm taking the game personally, I'm generally trying to prove something by it. I might be trying to prove that I am, indeed, a wonderful person or a good player, or that I really understand the

game and the best way to play it, or that you really don't understand. There are, in fact, a vast multitude of things I could be trying to prove.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the coach says, "Look, it doesn't matter why. What matters is that you weren't playing. You were trying to do something that the game isn't for. You couldn't tell that someone was going to throw you the ball because you were too busy trying to get it. If you want to play, take this time to listen to yourself. Get to know the frame of mind you're in. Feel your tightness. Listen to what you're thinking—to the arguments that are going on inside you. Listen to the anger. Remember it. Remember that this is how you are when you can't play."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps it would work best if our coaches didn't represent any team at all but were representatives of the community at large.

Perhaps that way the coaches could keep the game, the whole game, going. Perhaps then I would be more clear about why the coach sent me out.

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

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

Notes

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

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

5

Changing the Game

We've seen that a game can change. We've seen that the very game we're playing can become something we never intended it to be.

We made the change. It changed because of the way we were playing it.

It changed for the worse when we lost control. We didn't just lose control, we actually surrendered it to other people with whom we weren't even playing. As a result, though we were all involved in the game as much as we possibly could be, none of us was able to enjoy it. We couldn't even see that it was just a game, that it wasn't for real, that we were only playing.

It changed for the better when we discovered a different source of control. When that kid took his chair with him during the game of musical chairs, he established for us all a new way of seeing the game we were playing together.

But suppose what we really want to do is play a game together, and every time we think we understand what game we are playing, somebody changes it. Suppose we are feeling so playful that we destroy the game together. If that's what we want to do—destroy the game—then everything's fine. But suppose we really want to play a *game*.

An example:

We start out with a game of dodgeball. We've been playing it for about five minutes. We're beginning to get the sense of what it means to play it well. At the same time, we're not quite committed to the game—we're not really into it yet. You're an ender and you throw the ball at me. I catch it. Now, according to what we understand to be the rules of the game, we're supposed to trade roles. Since I caught the ball, I get rewarded. Since you didn't hit me, you get punished.

In a moment of high cuteness, I decide to keep the ball. I just stand there, holding the ball against my stomach. And then, as soon as I notice that other people have noticed, I run.

So people start running after me. I dribble teasingly. I dash madly. I run circles. The chase is on.

Then, just as it seems we've agreed that we're playing some kind of chasing game, I throw the ball to you.

You're shocked, so you throw the ball back to me. I'm tired, so I throw the ball back to you. Then you notice that others have noticed, so you take the ball and run. And then, as soon as you see someone getting too close, you throw the ball back to me.

Ah, keep-away. All right. Good game. But then, when somebody gets the ball, instead of throwing it or running with it, she lies on top of it.

People try to get it away from her. Other people try to keep them from getting close to her.

Another game. What game is it? I don't know, do you?

Somebody steps on somebody else's hand. Somebody else steps on somebody else's hair. Some people really want to get the ball back. They're serious. They really want to start a game. Others don't know what's happening. Others are laughing hysterically.

It's all play and no game, all release and no control. No one can find the center. We have lost all responsibility—to the game, to the community, to ourselves.

We are not playing well at all.

Of Play and Games

There is a very fine balance between play and game, between control and release, lightness and heaviness, concentration and spontaneity. The function of our play community is to maintain that balance, to negotiate between the game-as-it-is-being-played and the game-as-we-intend-it-to-be. It is for that reason that we maintain the community.

On the one hand we have the playing mind—innovative, magical, boundless. On the other is the gaming mind—concentrated, determined, intelligent. And on the hand that holds them both together we have the notion of playing well.

The Need for Change

The balance between the playing mind and the gaming mind is never at an equilibrium. There is a dynamic tension between these two—a dialog. Playing well means playing within that dialog.

So the definition of playing well is the result of an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation. It changes as we do, sometimes drastically, sometimes subtly.

Suppose we're playing a game of volleyball. We're playing the regulation game: teams, rotation, points. It just so happens that I'm getting a little tired of playing that way. Something has changed. I don't like the way I'm playing anymore.

I could just walk away from the game. There are boundaries, and I could just step outside if I wanted to. But we are playing with

small teams. I would be missed. I owe it to my team to stick it out until the game is over.

At the same time, I know I'm not playing well. The game isn't feeling right for me. My mind is wandering. I'm missing. I'm thinking about taking a nap. I'm wondering if the net is too high for me to put my toes through. I'm watching the shadows play. In fact, I'm not only missing the ball, I'm missing altogether.

So, there are times when playing the game as it is being played is a violation of the convention of the play community. I'm actually, in some way, interfering with the intention of the community. I'm not even trying to play well.

Though it is only fair, in terms of the game we're playing, that I continue playing, that I stick it out until the very end—though it is not only fair but also, in terms of my commitment to the team, obligatory that I remain in the game—I am cheating the community by the way I'm playing. The game is small enough for me to be felt. The balance between the playing mind and the gaming mind, between me and the other players, is sensitive enough to perceive the shift. I am causing it to wobble. People are trying to play around me. There is a hole where I stand that is draining energy from the game.

It therefore becomes incumbent on me to do something about it. I could announce my problem to others in the community, but that would stop the game. I could quit, but that would be unfair to my team.

I can only see two other possibilities: I could try to focus myself in some way so that I could get back into the game, or I could try to somehow change the game itself.

If I select the first alternative, no one needs to know about it. I can withdraw within myself and argue myself back into the game. I can instruct myself to focus on the ball, to watch the seams, to notice how the light hits it.

But it isn't working. I'm focusing so intently on the ball that I forget to hit it. Somehow, the inner balance is getting shakier and shakier.

This leaves me with only one alternative.

I recognize that it is not always appropriate to change the game. It requires a sensitivity to the needs of the community as well as to my own needs. I am not sure that I am able to be sensitive enough to anything.

This leaves me with no alternatives at all.

Finding Permission

I happen to notice that I did get more involved in the game when I was able to play close to the net. Perhaps my inner wanderings have something to do with the fact that I'm playing back.

During our next rotation, I go up to the net and ask if it's OK if I play there. Strangely enough, it is.

After all of this internal mishmosh, I discover that all I had to do was ask—that the permission was there all the time, and all I had to do was get it.

Here I was, trying to be so responsive to the needs of the community, and I totally forgot that the community we have created together was in response to the needs of each of us. My teammates knew that I was having trouble focusing on the game. It is in their own interest that I find the position that lets me play well.

Sure I can play front. Sure I can stay there as long as I need to. If it helps our game, why not?

The Bent Rule

We didn't really change a rule, we bent it. We made an exception, and it was clear to all of us that it was all right. If making an exception helps us have an exceptional game, anything is all right.

As the well-timed cheat helps restore the game to the players, the bent rule helps return the players to the game.

For example, suppose you're playing solitaire. Now you've gone through a modicum of effort to lay out the cards in their proper and officially authorized array. You have reached the point of play at which, though the game has been going for quite a while, you find you are about to lose. You almost won, but not quite.

Everyone knows that cheating at solitaire is an example of poor character. Even though there's no one around to call you on your cheating. Even though the only one you could possibly be cheating is yourself.

At this point in the game, either because of your highly evolved ability to rationalize, or because of your desire to see the game through, you decide to bend a rule. But, in order to maintain your sense of respectability, you decide to allow yourself only one small bend in one small rule. And then, if you still lose, you'll admit failure and pick up the cards and start all over again.

Now you're not doing a particularly admirable thing. You've admitted to yourself that, even if you win, you'll have won only because you cheated. Well, not cheated, exactly, but bent a rule. So in fact what you've done is to change the game. You're honest enough to admit to yourself that actually, in terms of the unchanging game, you have in fact lost. But, well, look at it this way: Now that you've lost, you can make up a new goal—how about seeing how long it takes to win? Maybe you'll have to bend a couple of rules. Maybe you'll even have to spindle, fold, and otherwise mutilate them, but, well, what does it matter now that you've lost?

So, you merely take the top card off the pile and place it underneath. Oh, joy! Behold what new possibilities have emerged!

The Borrowed Rule

If bending or breaking a rule is a bit too disturbing for the gaming mind to handle, we can employ a device which conforms a bit more at least to the letter of the law. We can borrow a rule from another game and attach it to ours.

After all, it's a real rule. It just wasn't part of the game when we started playing. But there's precedent.

Let's go back to your game of solitaire. As you know, there are many kinds of solitaire. In one kind, the rule is that you turn over every third card. In another, you turn over each card.

So, if turning over the third card, when you're playing a game like Canfield,[1] is not yielding positive results, well then you can turn over every card, as in the game of Las Vegas solitaire,[2] and see if that works.

Then, in some solitaires, you build up, in others, you build down. In some you play red on black, in others you play without regard to suit or color.

Thus, whenever another form of solitaire seems more advantageous to you, you simply switch to that form—announcing to yourself, of course, that you have in fact failed, and you're just employing this particular modification for the fun of it.

Sacredness

Rules are made for the convenience of those who are playing. What is fair at one time or in one game may be inhibiting later on. It's not the game that's sacred, it's the people who are playing.

It might have been true that, because of the way we were playing

volleyball together, the rotation rule was superfluous. Suppose none of us cared what positions we were playing. Suppose the fact was that nobody wanted to stay in any particular position at all, that we were able to play together well enough no matter what position anyone held. Then, it's no one's advantage to keep the rotation rule. Then, you might as well let me play where I want to play. Then we can all let each other play where we want to play.

Breaking or bending or borrowing a rule is only bad when we attempt to conceal it (from each other or ourselves) or when it is done to the detriment of another player. When that happens, it's cheating for real. It violates not the sacredness of a rule but the spirit of the play community.

Whenever we want to change the game, it's safest to make an open admission that that is what we're trying to do. Cheating for real is something that we try to conceal from each other. Telling each other helps keep the game in play.

It's just like Manny Kant used to say: "If I want to find out whether what I'm doing is OK, all I have to do is imagine what it would be like if everybody knew about it and did it too."[3]

Bigger Changes

There are many rules and, in fact, quite a few conventions which can be changed without drastically changing the game.

For example, we could play volleyball with a somewhat larger or smaller ball. We could increase or decrease the number of players on a side. We could raise or lower the net.

None of these changes would keep us from playing volleyball. Any of them could help us play a better game.

I am not advocating changing the game for the sake of novelty. I am not saying that it is better to change the game than to keep it the same. I am merely pointing out that there are times—more times than one would think—when it is remarkably useful to the community as a whole and to the players in particular to have the power to change some of the rules.

The efficacy of change is, once again, a question of timing. If the change comes out of a realization that the game, as we are playing it, is no longer appropriate—if it is unquestionably clear that we are either playing too much or gaming too much—the change will be accepted because the change is necessary.

If it is the right time, we can change anything. We can make up any kind of rule that we want to. We could make the court three feet wide. We could play volleyball with balloons. We could give everybody a ball. We could play with two nets. With four nets. With a moving net. Without a net. We could play silently, in the dark, with a luminescent ball. We could play on the ice. There could be three teams. Four. One.

As long as we make sure that it is the right time and that everyone understands and agrees to the rules, we can do anything we want to and still be playing well. OK, we might not be playing *the* game. But there is no "*the* game" for a play community. Any game whatever, as long as we are playing it well, is *the* game.

Too Much Change

Then there is the time when we become so fascinated by our power to change the game that we tend to get carried away by it all. We become so intent on celebrating our newly regained authority that all we want to do is change rules. We never keep the same rule for longer than five minutes. We change everything: sides, scores, balls, language, clothes. You name it, we change it.

At the beginning it's cute. It feels good to have this power back. It feels good to know that we have permitted each other to use it.

However, after a while it tends to get a little disorienting. We are so excited about finding out all the wonderful ways we can change a game that we suddenly, crashingly, become aware of the fact that we no longer have a game to play.

If we are in a good humor at that particular moment, then everything is wonderful and we are restored. Maybe we will all go for a swim or something. Maybe we are actually able to settle on a particular variation and play it without changing anything.

If, on the other hand, one or several or all of us are not in such a state of willing hilarity, we could wind up without a community. It could happen. It has happened. A few of us feel, each, individually, that everybody else knows what's happening and we don't. We could feel that things have gotten out of hand, that people are being too silly. We could feel that we are somehow being attacked by all this wonderfulness.

We want to play, but we can find nothing solid to play with. There is no game for us to play. So we lose contact. We lose our sense of control. With loss of control goes loss of safety. With loss of safety goes loss of the willingness to play. Without the willingness to play, there is no play community.

Restoring Balance

When we come back to the realization that the point of changing the game is so that we can play it well together, we discover that it is a more delicate task than keeping a game going, which, in turn, is a more delicate task than finding one to start with. The balance grows ever finer.

Analogy: Think of a game as a sensitive instrument—a microscope, maybe. We can put anything at all, as long as it's small enough, under that microscope. Under low power we can see broad terrains. This is fascinating. We want to see them in greater detail. But as we increase the power of our microscope, we discover that it becomes more difficult to find the proper focus.

Another analogy: One button turns the TV on. Another button selects the channel. A third one is for selecting the source. If you don't know how to work the buttons, you're not going to get the picture you're looking for.

The change thing can go too far. Eventually, we wind up totally unwilling to change the game anymore. And then we go about trying to figure out how we can change the people who are playing it.

We have not only gone too far, we have gone completely off.

If anything needs change, it is much more logical to change the game than it is to change the people who are playing.

It is more logical because the game isn't for real. It's something made up. It's something made up for the sake of those who are playing.

It's not only more logical, it's even wiser. If we all agree to change the game, the worst that can happen is that we'll wind up with a lousy game. But if our purpose becomes to change each other. . . . Frankly, I'd rather not even think about it.

So let us say that our play community has proclaimed a new morality, and inscribed in gold on our flag is the motto *if you can't play it, change it*, and woven into our banner are the words *if it helps, cheat*.

Now we find ourselves with an amazing, almost overwhelming freedom. We can change anything. Yes, there are regulations, but we are the ones who make them. There is no other authority than ours. We are the officials.

If we weren't so sure of our commonality—if we had any doubt about the objective, which we all share, of finding a game we can play well together—we simply couldn't handle all this freedom. We

would get lost in it. We would take things personally.

Changing the game is the most delicate of all the things we're doing together. When we play a proven game—a game that has been played before—we are presented with a system of rules that has a balance of its own. Even if we ourselves have never played that game before, if the game is, officially, a game that works, we begin playing it with the knowledge that it is fair. We know that there are reasons for the rules.

Suppose we're playing tic-tac-toe. Maybe this is the first time we've played it. We don't really have to ask why we should be trying to get three instead of two or four in a row. We could try it that way, but ordinarily we wouldn't. We play the game according to its rules because we believe that the rules have been all thought out—that if we tried playing for two or four in a row the game wouldn't play well, we wouldn't be able to play it well together.

It just so happens that we are right. Tic-tac-toe doesn't work if we try for two in a row. Well, yes, we did try it. Curiosity, you know. But the first player always won. That wasn't very much fun—especially for the second player. But even for the first player as well: Who wants to play a game that you win before you start? Call that fun? Call that a well-played game?

So it seems to us that the game has been all figured out already—that every rule is what it should be. It's true. The game is as it should be. But it might also be the case that we aren't playing it well. That, in fact, we should change something about the game.

What would happen if we changed one of the rules?

We would definitely disturb the balance of the game. We would probably have to change other rules to restore it.

So we're on very shaky ground. Once we begin to change a rule, the only framework that is keeping us together is our intention to play well. Suppose it happens that you, playful person that you are, completely assured that you've no other goal than playing well and joyously—suppose it happens that you begin to wonder about *my* motivations. Maybe all I really want to do is beat you. Maybe that's why I'm so interested in changing the rules. I mean, what makes you so sure that I'm that community-minded?

All of which is to say that we cannot even begin to explore ways of changing the game until we are certain that we share the intention to play well together. This certainty is not found in the rules of any game. It lies in the nature of the relationship we are able to build with each other—in the establishment and the continual reaffirmation of our intention of playing well together. It is found and maintained through the conventions of the play community.

But we have already played together enough to know that the game isn't really so very important.

Let's go back to tic-tac-toe. We now know how it's supposed to be played. We've played it many times. We know that we can play it well. We also know that the game isn't very interesting anymore. We've figured it out. When we play, the first player either wins or ties.

But we're interested in playing some tic-tac-toe-like game. We have pencils and plenty of paper. Rather than try to invent a new game, we decide that it would be easiest to start with one we already know.

Let's look at some of the things that we can change.

First of all, we know that the grid looks like this:

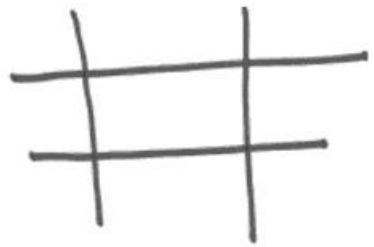

Figure 5.1

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

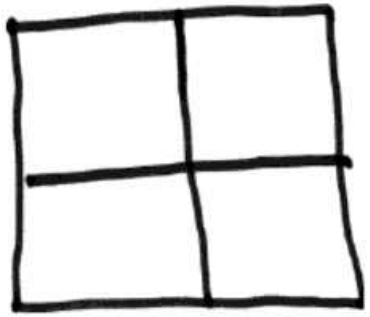

Figure 5.2

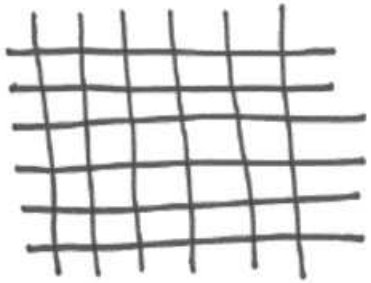

Figure 5.3

Figure 5.4

Granted, if we get too creative with the grid designs, we'll wind up with something beautiful to behold but impossible to play with. Further granted, whatever way we change the grid, we're going to have to change other rules to restore the balance of the game. So maybe first we should take a look at the rules and get some sense of the range available to us.

One rule we know about is that the game is supposed to end when somebody gets three in a row. We could easily change that. We could make it four in a row, or five, or a hundred. Then we'd get to use the bigger grid. But how big should we make it? We'll have to play with it for a while to find out.

Or, maybe we'd like something other than a row. A circle maybe. How about three touching each other? Or four? Or how about four opposite each other?

There's a lot to explore. Maybe too much already. Maybe we should stop and just play with what we've already discovered. Let's see what the changes do. Let's see which changes we like best.

Well, we can always do that later. This is fun. Let's see what else we can change.

The rule is that whoever gets three in a row is the winner, and then the game is over. We could change the part about the game being over. We could say that whoever gets three in a row second is

the winner. Why not? Maybe it'd be more fun that way. Maybe we could play better that way.

Then there's the rule about the tie game. Who says the tie game means that nobody wins? Maybe we both should win. Would that work? Would it still be fun?

Actually, I remember reading in one of my books on games about a game called "tit-tat-toe"[4] that introduced a character named "Old Nick." Whenever a game is tied, the points go to Old Nick, and the next player to win also wins all of Old Nick's points. Sounds good. Sounds like it would add a tension that tic-tac-toe is lacking. Or maybe we could see if, at the end of twenty games, say, Old Nick has more points than either of us, and, if he does, then we would have both lost to him. Interesting, maybe.

Any other rules?

Well, how about the rule that you use X and O? Maybe we could use I and U. Of course, that wouldn't change the game any. We can really use any symbols that we want to as long as we can tell them apart. We could use colors instead of symbols. It wouldn't make a difference, really.

Maybe we like the way the game looks more when we use colors than when we use letters. That's reason enough to try it. Except that what we want to do is change the game so that we can play it better. And changing the symbols isn't enough of a change. It's interesting, though, that we can change some of the rules and not change the game at all.

So let's look for rules to change that really make a difference, that will really help us find the right game.

How about the rule that says you're supposed to draw a line through your three letters to prove that you've got three in a row? It helps us make sure that a win is really a win. But the strategies would be the same whether or not we use that rule.

So, to make the game different, to change it significantly, we have to find a rule to change that will result in a change of strategies.

I've got one that might prove drastic enough: the rule that you take turns.

Suppose I got two turns and then you got two turns. Would that foster the development of new strategies?

Do you have to take your turn? Could you pass? Would you ever find it strategically useful to pass?

What would happen if there were already some letters on the grid before the game started?

The rule is that we start with an empty board. It is the rule, really, even if it's one we ordinarily take for granted. But suppose, even before the game began, there was an X in one corner and an O in the corner diagonally opposite? That'd be a real change, maybe.

Then there's the rule that we only use one kind of letter each. I mean, if I use X, I can't use Z too. Or maybe I could.

Maybe we could both use Z whenever we wanted to. Then we'd each have two letters to choose from. Sounds interesting, no? Maybe the Z could be a neutral letter, one that neither of us could use except to block someone? Or how about using the Z as a temporary block and saying that we could use that space for one of our letters only after a complete turn has passed?

What would happen if we could use each other's letters? That'd mean that either of us could win with an X or an O as long as that move completed a three in a row.

Actually, I've already tried that variation and it really makes for an interesting game. I play it just like tic-tac-toe, keeping all the other rules the same except for the one about whose marks are whose. I call this game "hypocrite." By giving it a name, I help officialize it. No, it's not tic-tac-toe we're playing, it's a much more sophisticated game called hypocrite.

How about the rule that you can't move a letter once it's been put down?

Well, it's obvious that if we use paper and pencil to play the game and we allow each other to move letters around, we're going to wind up with a paper full of holes. After all, there are only so many times you can erase before you discover you're beginning to erase the table instead of what's left of the paper.

So who says that we have to play with paper and pencil? We could make a grid out of wood if we wanted to. We could make pieces. Then we could really get things moving.

And then we could make a larger grid. How about a star-shaped grid? And then we could change the idea of getting three in a row to getting all your pieces on a star point. And then we could change the name of the game to something really official sounding, like Chinese checkers.

OK, before we get much further into this, let's extrapolate. It seems that there are rules which guide how we can change rules. Some of these are merely pragmatic. Others are a bit closer to conventional.

General Definition of a Changed Game:

A variation which requires the development of a new strategy.

General Purpose for Changing a Game:

The one you're playing is no longer giving you enough of a challenge for you to feel you want to play it well. You can play it well, but you're losing interest. Your gaming mind is bored. You're not playing the way you want to be playing. Or, vice versa, you can't play it well, your playing mind is overwhelmed, the game is too hard.

The general purpose for changing a game, therefore, is to restore equilibrium.

Specific Recommendation for Technique:

Change one rule at a time. Change the rule and see what happens to the rest of the game. See what other changes you have to make in order to restore the balance. If you try to change too many rules, and the game doesn't work, you won't be able to tell why.

Universal Definition of the Working Game:

What you are experiencing wellness in.

Another Specific Recommendation:

There are more rules than you realize. Many of them belong to a larger convention rather than a specific game. All of them can be changed. Some are subtle and take a long time to find. Cheat and see if anybody notices. Cheat openly so everyone can see it. If you think it's a rule but you're not sure, see what happens when you break it.

To Bear in Mind:

The reason you're changing the game:

You're not changing the game for the sake of changing it. You're changing it for the sake of finding a game that works.

Once this freedom is established, once we have established why

we want to change a game and how we go about it, a remarkable thing happens to us: *we* become the authorities.

No matter what game we create, no matter how well we are able to play it, it is our game, and we can change it when we need to. We don't need permission or approval from anyone outside our community. We play our games as we see fit.

Which means that now we have at our disposal the means whereby we can always fit the game to the way we want to play.

This is an incredible freedom, a freedom that does more than any game can, a freedom with which we nurture the play community. The search for the well-played game is what holds the community together. But the freedom to change the game is what gives the community its power.

This is a freedom which only works well as long as we don't *have* to use it. We need to know that we can change the game when we need to. We also need to know when we need to change the game.

So, like everything else we've looked at in the pursuit of the well-played game, changing a game only works sometimes. It can work against us as well as for us. It can confuse as well as clarify, destroy as well as empower. Only if the intention to play well is clearly, undeniably established and shared, only as long as that holds true does the play community hold true.

Handicapping

Another thing that might stand between us and the well-played game is our refusal to acknowledge our differences.

The game that I play well may not be the same that you play well. Your experience of wellness might be different from mine. We can acknowledge and validate the well-played game as it is experienced by each of us. But when we wish to play well together, we must discover the game that works for all of us.

Even though I'm playing as hard as I can, I'm not playing well. Even though I'm as focused as I can be, you're playing with an ease and a sense of mastery that is unavailable to me at this time in this game. I don't know the game as well as you do. I am not as familiar with its subtleties. You find yourself playing well, but the game we are playing together is not a well-played game.

We can look for another game—one with which we're both equally familiar. We could change the game we're playing. We could find other people to play with.

But suppose this particular game is the one we both want to play. I am as fascinated by the potential I am discovering in myself for playing this game well as you are fascinated by the excellence that you are able to manifest through this game. Can we find a way to play it well together? Can we make it even somehow—the challenge, the sense of play, the opportunity to play well?

Of course we can. We've already done it. When we were playing Ping-Pong together and we discovered, eventually, that in order for us to play this game well together you had to play with the wrong hand. That was the first step.

You gave yourself a handicap. You changed your criterion for playing the game well so that we could find a way of playing it well together. You found a way to make the game as new to you as it was to me.

As we play any one game, and play it repeatedly, with different people, we become more and more familiar with how we are when we are playing well. As we become more familiar with how we are, we become clearer about the sense of wellness that we are able to experience and manifest in the game. We are able to extend that experience with the game until we have reached such a stage of mastery that, assuming we have found someone who has reached a similar mastery, we can play well consistently, from the beginning

to the end of the game. We may not be as "good" as a professional, but we do, in fact, delight in the way we are able to play.

Suppose I can play checkers well. We play together and discover that I am able to play well more often than you are. We play a game together and I win. You have momentary flashes of insight. I have a steady light of understanding. I see combinations that you don't. Just when you're sure something is about to happen and you've prepared yourself fully for it, I surprise you with something else. When the game ends, I have four pieces on the board and you have none.

What would happen if, next time we played together, I started the game with four fewer pieces?

I'd be a little less familiar with the game than I was before. I am less certain of the strategies that will work best under these conditions. I know that I won't be able to use the same opening. The game is newer to me. I won't be able to play it well the way I was able to play it well before. But it is now more likely that we will be able to play it well together.

Handicapping is used in order to equalize familiarity—to restore the balance between the different players' skills and understanding of the game. It is another evolution of the concept of fairness, stemming from a deeper understanding of the nature of the play community and the intention of playing well together.

Before we assumed a handicap, we were already playing fairly. We abided by the same set of rules. Neither of us cheated. But now the kind of fairness we are seeking is one that will assure both of us access to a well-played game.

Once we begin our exploration of handicapping, the possibilities for making the game work are again endless. If you play that well, and I don't, maybe you'd like to try it blindfolded? Maybe you can give me three free moves during the game? Or more if I need them? Maybe I can take a move back?

The convention of "no takebacks" has been helpful to us before. It has helped each of us become more familiar with the nature of the game. We have to deliberate more, to be more cautious. We have to be sure, before we make a move, that it is the move we really want to make. We have to plan ahead enough to see the implications of a move.

We have known, in our past experience of the game, too much sloppiness. Suppose, after you make your move, I deliberate for a while. It has opened up several possibilities, and I have to see which one is best. I enjoy this experience of deliberation. Then, just before I make my move, you want to take yours back. Now I have to deliberate all over again. I don't enjoy deliberation that much! At first, I find this effort, though slightly unsatisfying, not too much of a distraction. After a while, however, I find that my ability to sense the game is suffering. I have to plan also for the next event in which you decide to take your move back. So I'm slowed down. My opportunity to play well is slowed down. And finally I say, "Look, from now on, once you take your finger off the piece, your turn is over, OK?" I say that to you calmly, openly. If I have to say it again, I will be significantly less calm.

Thus the convention of no takebacks becomes part of the way in which we perceive the game. It becomes a convention to which we always adhere. On the other hand, it might just happen that, because of the differences between us, that convention would stand in the way of our having the opportunity to play well together. Suppose that we could play better if we both had the opportunity to take moves back?

Yes, it's not like life. In life, it doesn't seem that one can take a move back very easily. But we're only playing. We aren't ready to make the game that lifelike. Later, maybe, when we're both more familiar with how we play well together, we can up the stakes to make the game more interesting.

Absolute mastery over a game usually results in loss of interest.

When we become too familiar with a game, we tend to drop it; like tic-tac-toe, it becomes too predictable.

In handicapping one or some of us so that we can all play well together, we are not, in fact, negatively affecting anyone's experience of the well-played game. Even though you, master that you are, have accepted a handicap, you are still playing well. You might not be as familiar with the game as you were, but that is as it should be, because we're playing together, and the game, whatever form it takes, is a result of how we are able to combine. It has nothing to do with trying to find out which one of us plays better. The focus is on how we play well, together.

The purpose of a handicap is not to limit anyone's access to playing well but rather to restore the challenge to all players. When you accept a handicap, you aren't holding back anything—you're increasing your challenge, and addressing yourself to the challenge we have set before us as a play community.

When I'm playing with my children, I am aware how important it is to them that they have as much chance to win as I do. We all want the game to be fair. We all want to play as hard as we can so that we can experience playing well together.

Sometimes I wind up playing the game blindfolded, with my hands behind my back, while standing on one leg. Other times, I simply start off with a few checkers more.

We have found that it violates our mutual sense of fair play if I let them win. They know that I am playing poorly for their sake. Even though they enjoy winning, they get upset when they understand that I have held back. Even though it was for their sake that I wasn't playing as well as I could. Even though my intentions were parentally pure. The fact is that by letting them win I deprived us all of the opportunity to play well together.

Better that I handicap myself than handicap our opportunity to share a well-played game.

The Score

Still another thing that we can change so that we can keep our game going well is what we give each other points for.

I don't think it will come as a shock to you to discover that you can play any game with or without score. Sometimes, as we've already found out, the best way for us to play Ping-Pong is just to volley. We could, if we wanted to, keep track of how many times we hit the ball. That could be our score, if we wanted one.

Obviously we could play tennis the same way we played Ping-Pong.

Usually, however, what happens after we volley with someone is that one of us sooner or later says, "OK, let's play the game." Which means: This volleying around was all well and good, but it was only a warm-up. Sure, the goal is to play well together. Sure, we can volley forever. But neither of us was playing very well. We were losing our focus—not really playing hard at all. So let's make it interesting again. Let's play for score.

Keeping track of the score doesn't make tennis into tennis. We can be playing without score. But part of tennis as we've come to understand it is in trying to make the other player miss. It increases the challenge because it makes us each try to be everywhere. You want to be as attentive, as present as I do. By trying to make each other miss we provide each other an invitation to awareness. We are saying, "Look, you want to be fully present, you want to be in a state of complete responsiveness and control, so see if you can get this one." Because that challenge is what we are asking from each other, because it helps each of us to experience playing well, it is right and good that I reward you with a point because you gave me a shot I couldn't return.

On the other hand, there are times when that kind of challenge is

not what we need from each other in order to reach the well-played game together. There are times when the score becomes too important and we lose our focus on the game. There are times when we are giving each other points for things that are hurting our game.

Yes, when we're just volleying we're really playing a different game. It might be confusing to call it tennis. But, if what we intended to do was volley, if we found that well-played game by just volleying, then that's what we should be giving each other points for —keeping it going—even if we don't call the game tennis.

There's a tendency, as we begin to make things official, to think that only one particular form of a game is the real game. The fact is, any game we're playing is a real game. That's the fact. After all, the only thing that makes a game real is that there are people playing it.

But because we want to keep things clear, let's call tennis tennis and let's call our game something else. We can call it "volleytennis," "untennis," "cooperative tennis," "Chinese tennis"—we could even call it "flurtch" or "gronker" or "smunk." You don't change a game by giving it a different name. You give a game a different name because you're playing it a different way.

It's really amazing how much a game changes, how different it becomes, when you change what you are scoring for.

Let's score each other for bravery. Whenever either of us clearly risks limb, if not life, in the attempt to return a shot, that player, whether or not she actually succeeds in returning the ball, gets a point.

Let's score each other for grace, flow, harmony, endurance, agility. Let's score ourselves.

It all comes down to this: What do we want to get points for?

And then we discover that we can get points for anything. Anything. And each time we choose to score for something else, we change the game.

So how about this: Maybe, since this is my first time playing, maybe I should get twice as many points for making the shot. Who says that everybody should get the same number of points for making it? Not me. I didn't say it.

The Drastic Change

And then, of course, there is the possibility that, though we can change the game infinitely, though we can constantly and continuously find ways we can make the game work, what we need to be doing is something else altogether. That what we need to do, in fact, is forget the whole thing.

Notes

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

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

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

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

6

Ending the Game

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

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

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

Suddenly Jimmy began to raise his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gotcha last!"

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, I know. All this sounds like a mystical utterance proceeding from the wandering mind of quintessential whatifness, but, believe me, I'd never consider looking for a well-played game if I thought that once I found it I wouldn't be able to stop playing it. I could get

killed, even, if I had to keep on playing no matter what. If I start a game of football or checkers or solitaire even and then discover that I can't stop playing—a game I can't get out of—what's going to happen to me when I get tired or hurt or broken? Can you call that fun?

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

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

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

Quitting

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And, when the assurance is established, when we find ourselves playing a game—because we know that it's really all right to quit, that quitting doesn't *mean* anything—we know that we are all playing because we choose to play. We know we are all playing. We are here, in this game, voluntarily, of our own free will. We are together because we want to be together. By our mere presence we reaffirm our commitment to the play community.

Because I know that you can quit whenever you want to, that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And I say, "Sure."

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

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

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

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

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

We sit in a circle.

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

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

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

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

More or less.

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

"The object, despite what it's called, is to keep it going without

making any mistakes. Are you really sure you want to play this game?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quitting Practice

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

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

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

We need to do this because usually, in other circumstances in other communities, there is a meaning to quitting. When you quit when you're ahead, when you quit when you're losing, it means something about you. You are demonstrating poor character. You're doing something unfair. You're not letting me get even. But, look, friends, quitting has nothing at all to do with character unless we make a rule that it does. And who would want to make that kind of rule? It would ruin our chances to play freely. We'd never be sure that this was the game that everybody wanted to play if everybody

had to stay in the game, if no one could quit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quitting with Honor

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quitting for Good

It might happen that we're not sure whether or not the person who quits can get right back into the game. If you quit now, can you join again a minute from now? How about a half hour from now? Or is it going to be that if you quit, you quit for good?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quitting for Effect

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

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

If the community as a whole is not sensitive but there are

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Getting Back In

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

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

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

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

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

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

If you want to get into the game, there is little those of us who are playing can do to help you. If you can't tell, we're too involved in our game to stop long enough to tell you. If we had to worry about you, if we had to wonder whether or not you were feeling excluded,

we'd have problems getting involved in anything together. We'd be so busy trying to make sure that everyone was doing what everyone wanted to be doing that we'd never be able to focus on what, in fact, we are doing together.

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

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

Being Left Alone

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

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

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

She went into the safe area.

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

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

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

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

I was being tested.