

The Daily Game

“Laugh longer, live louder”

- the Oaqui

Give us this day our Daily Game, and give us our playfulness that we may play together.

The Daily Game. The game that we find our selves playing from the moment we wake up, to the moment we go to sleep. The game we've been playing since we were old enough to be playful. A slowly changing game. Each day, each turn, each round slightly different, played with always somehow different players, in slightly changing places, for somewhat different reasons. But played, nevertheless, by us, and everyone we play with, every day.

It's you, your very self, playing passenger or driver, person in a crowd, person on an elevator, lover, spouse, parent, boss, salesperson, chief chef, child.

There are two schools here: The Play Fully school recognizes that the art of the Daily Game is to give your self over completely, playing more fully, more totally, bringing more and more of your self and boundless skills and growing power into the game. I attended this school when I wrote *The Well-Played Game*.

And then there's the other school. The Play Playfully school. The school that says maybe playfulness won't help you win. But it will most definitely help you have fun. And in having fun, you're more fun to play with, and in playing with you, we make the game more fun, and when the game is more fun, we all win.

And from time to time, sometimes timeless time, you find your self losing. Maybe not lost, but losing enough to remind you that, despite your best efforts, sooner or later, you'll lose the game forever.

Sometimes I get religious about the whole thing, sometimes I think of fun

and laughter as a spiritual experience. Our lives have become increasingly fragile, our world increasingly harsh. It is a miracle that we can laugh at all. And that's the whole point.

Winning: five observations regarding the Daily Game

I. Me, More And Less

Sometimes, I am bigger than my self. When I'm playing. Music, for example. Or walking along the bay. Or sometimes just because you say Hello to me. My very ego, my sense of self, my very ME grows beyond me.

Sometimes I am remarkably condensed, and can be found entirely defined by a single stubbed toe.

Sometimes I am so small in the world that I become only this body or mind or this infinitesimal thought. Me the self-image. Me the imagined.

Sometimes, I am very big. Sometimes, I am so big that I am virtually indistinguishable from the big WE. WE the lovers, WE the family, the team, the neighborhood, nationality, faith, the humanity.

Most of the time, though, I am a little too little to recognize the big, binding WE. I can almost always touch the WE that ties me to you. Less frequently can I feel the fleeting WE that unites me with family. And perhaps once in a great while, the WE neighbors, WE Americans, WE English-speakers.

But it's only when I am my biggest ME that I get to understand my self in the light of bigger WEs: WE human beings, WE the living, WE the World.

And then I explode into being. I get to be body and mind and spirit, idea and action, archetype and prototype, all at once. Then I get to be beyond belief.

2. The Big Deal

The fun of games is that they let you experience that bigger ME.

That's what winning is about. That's why they invented it.

When you win, you get to be larger. Larger than the game. Larger than the day. Large enough, sometimes, to reach historic proportions.

Sometimes, in some games, you get to experience your very big self as part of a winning team. And when your team wins, the WE of which you are a very big part suddenly gets so

very much bigger, so very much more fun to be part of, that you your self become a bigger ME.

Some games you really don't have to win, and you still get to be a definitely bigger ME, part of a convincingly bigger WE. Some games, all you have to do is play.

ANY game that you play well, with people who are playing well, is a ME\WE: an undeniable and self-evidential manifestation of the bigger MEness, participant in and progenitor of the greater WEness.

3. Losing

Apparently, for the vast majority of us, most of life and just about all games, provide us with only more opportunities to lose.

There is just so much to lose! You can lose a turn. You can lose a point. You can lose a whole game. And that's the least of it!

And despite your attempts to proliferate your days with opportunities to win, as your days accumulate, you keep on discovering more and more opportunities to lose.

And some losing is even worse than others. Like the losing you do when you're on a losing team. Where you stop working together. And you become as if broken. Fragmented. Where you lose trust. Lose confidence. Lose face.

This is what we might as well call the experience of "me\weness" as opposed to what we might call "ME\WEness." The meanest "me." The demeaning "we." Where anything, even love, becomes an object of fear and pain.

And even here, actually, there is a connection, a reinforcement, a kind of satisfaction that is not exactly fun, but certainly much more fun when you're not the reason the game was lost.

4. World Of The Lost

Most organizations, businesses, governments, if not reinvented every now and then, encapsulate and perpetuate relationships based on loss.

These loss-focused relationships become cancerous, characterizing and consuming every conversation, between: employees, management, production, stakeholders, suppliers, customers; until there is no possibility of winning together anything at all.

Back and forth between ME\we and me\WE, between loss of community and loss of self, in

a cycle of perpetual disempowerment, spanning a chasm of infinite regress and regret. And it is everywhere endemic, in meetings and parties, sports and dances, ceremonies, festivals, where the only relationship we can sustain is based on our failure and belittlement, defeat and deficiency.

And it truly doth pith one off.

Forgive me if I dwell. This competition thing is bad enough. But this losing thing is really insidious, and it really takes our collective attention to some truly terrible places.

It is my re-considered opinion that I have no interest in losing, or in being part of a losing team, or in making anyone else lose, least of all you. I continually return to the conclusion that losing is not necessary or personally advantageous, no matter who does it. I really don't have to create a world where I lose or even worry about losing. And you don't have to, either.

We are actually allowed to have more fun than we can possibly imagine. Without anyone losing anything. Even at this very moment.

5. World Of The Found

Because in the World of the Found (i.e., not the world in which you have already lost your self, but in the very world in which you currently find your self) there are actually three ways to win, and only one way to lose.

Yes, there's the "me\we" (little "me," belittle "we") of mutual disempowerment. But then there's the "ME\we" of competition where, ultimately, only winners are supposed to have fun. And then there's the "me\WE" relationship, where everybody is so together that you re-define your self.

In the World of the Found you find your self embracing the ME\we and me\WE, experiencing with the gain of community the gain of self, in a cycle of increasingly mutual empowerment, swinging you ever higher through worlds of infinite depth and capacities for delight.

I call this ME\WE. I also call this "coliberation." Or the well-played game. Or, in the World of the Found, the right boss, the good job, the long marriage.

Cooperation and competition

So, let's talk about games first.

The key to the whole games thing is challenge. Challenge, as Csikszentmihalyi points out^{xi} so clearly, is central to the experience of flow, it is the invitation for us to engage, for us to develop and refine our abilities and master evermore complex tasks.

In cooperative games, the challenge has to be flexible, negotiable, and always changing for us to sustain the experience of play: let's see how long we can volley the ball back and forth across the net, let's see if it's more fun (challenging) if we raise the net, play further away. Maybe you should stand closer to the net and me further. Maybe I should use my non-dominant hand. The goal is to play together, to have fun, to engage each other. If we're not having fun, we increase or decrease the challenge. Cooperative games are difficult to sustain - they require creativity and sensitivity in order for players to arrive at the kind of challenge that will keep them all in play, regardless of how different their abilities might be.

In competitive games, the challenge is non-negotiable and if we want to have fun playing the game together, we have to be close in abilities. The closer, the greater the challenge. In competitive games, if we're not having fun, we have to find other people to play with. This is everywhere evident in professional sports, from chess to football. In competitive games, we wind up playing with people who are like us in skill and capability. Who look like us, dress like us, act like us, with perhaps minor differences that are noticeable only to a judge with a split-second timer.

In cooperative games, we are able to engage an entire community into play, regardless of differences in age and ability, and more often than not, it is these differences that prove to be the source of the challenge, the very thing that makes the game inviting and worth playing. It is the differences between the actors that make the play worth playing.

Cooperative games nurture diversity. Competitive games lead to uniformity.

In most societies, the young play games that have both cooperative and competitive elements. Tag, hide-and-seek, jump rope, cats cradle. These games are found to be the most sustainable - through them, children build community and develop social competencies. Later on, depending on the society, the range of games tends to narrow, and those that become national pastimes reflect the nature of that society. Thus, in one culture, like that of the Eskimo, it is games like "Blanket Toss" in which people are placed on a blanket and then everyone else throws them up in the air, that become integral to the culture, while in other cultures, it is games like football and hockey.

Once games reach the status of “national pastime,” however, players, and even officials, have little or no access to the rules. Rules become official and inviolate, changeable only by committees of non-players. Thus, competitive games become almost purely competitive, standing completely outside of the players control. Conformity, uniformity becomes the rule. Uniformed players’ almost indistinguishable from one another.

OK. Now we can think about the connections between competition, cooperation and things like the Internet and the computer games industry, the military and the school system, government and religion....

Loving competition

One of the games that George Leonard^{xii} liked to teach was a game he called “dho-dho-dho.” (I later learned that it is based on a South Asian game called Kabaddi^{xiii}.)

Two teams stood, facing each other, with one line between them and other lines behind. They would take turns, one player running across the line, trying to tag as many players as possible, and get back across the line to his own team. There were two obstacles to his completing his mission: 1) once he tagged someone, the rest of the players would do what they could to keep him from getting back across the line, and 2) as soon as he crossed the line into the opposing team’s territory, he had to keep saying “dho, dho, dho” without taking a breath.

As George taught the game, he would explain that it was a game of “loving competition.” The idea was to restrain the runner from the opposing team, hug him, hold him, but never, never to hurt him. To me, this game, more than any others we played, embraced the idea of loving competition as beautifully as players embracing each other in their attempts to keep an opponent from crossing the line.

I think the idea of loving competition embodies competition at its most mature. It is enlightened competition. It is a difficult concept to teach.

Another game George taught was the two-player game he called “Stand Off.” The players stand facing each other, about half-arm’s-length apart. They raise their hands so their palms face each other – but are far enough apart so that they don’t touch. Their feet are together. The object of the game is to cause the other player to lose balance enough to move one of her feet. It’s important to stress this point, so that people don’t think that they are trying to push each other or force each other. It’s all about relaxing your hands just enough so that you make the other player over reach. Competitive, yes, but in a loving way.