

# Creating the Play Community

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**H**ere we are, together to have fun. We've already dispensed with the sense of any other purpose. We have no need to prove anything in particular to anyone in general. We're not looking to be therapized or taught or changed. We want to celebrate. We want to play

We've got thousands of games to choose from. We don't feel that we have to play any special game in a special way. We're not together for that purpose. It's not a game that drew us to this place, it's the need, desire, inclination, instinct to share delight.

Some of our friends know games we've never heard of before. Their games may at first seem silly. It's hard to take them seriously. It's hard to feel that the games are important. It's easy to laugh, to laugh with. It's easy to play. The reward is in doing it. In rolling this absurdly big ball, pointlessly. In keeping it in the air. In lifting each other. In sitting in each other's laps. In pushing and pulling and running. In being tied together in a celebration of the fact that we are tied together. In quitting or joining for no reason.

It's not that their new games are especially important. It's that their games are new. No one is an expert lap sitter. No one is a professional ball pusher. So nobody has a reputation to risk. Nobody has anything to lose. If you enjoy yourself, you win.

Because the games are new, we get a sense that we're experimenting. No one guarantees anything. If a game doesn't work, we try to fix it, to see if we can make it work. After all, it's a new game. It's not official yet. In fact, we're the officials, all of us—the kids, the grandparents, everyone of us who has come to play. We make the judgments. We each take the responsibility for discovering what we can enjoy together. It makes so much more sense to change the game than to try to change the people who are there to play.

We are beginning to create a play community—not a forever community with a fixed code, but a temporary community with a code we make up as we go along, a community that we can continue creating anywhere, any time we find the people who want to create it with us.

The games we start with aren't competitive. (They could be

played competitively if we wished, but not yet.) To establish the play community we can't separate people into winners and losers. We can't begin with something that's going to divide us or measure us against each other. We begin the play community by embracing each other by giving each person the opportunity to experience him- or herself as a full and equal member.

Later on, we might want to set up scoring systems. Sometimes scoring helps to focus on each other. It all depends on what we're scoring for. Suppose we decide to score ourselves as a team. We could give our team points for its teamness, for coordinating and balancing and giving each player full access to play. Suppose we score ourselves instead of each other. Suppose we divide up into teams, and each team decides what it would like the other team to give points for.

When we stand opposite each other in a game, it's not because we are, in fact, opposites. When we find ourselves on one particular side, it's not because we feel that one side is any better. We make the separation so that we can discover a new union.

The creation of a play community is remarkable to witness. It goes through many moods, through phases of coming together and scattering, of intensity and relaxation, of high and low times. For it to be whole, it must embrace all the modes of experiencing.

"Well, that game was a bummer." No blame. It just didn't feel good. Everybody splits. Walks around. Lies down. Hides. A few people sit to talk. Then they take turns talking. Then they start creating a fantasy. Then other people join. Then the fantasy becomes larger. More people join. People start moving, running around. New game. New high. Someone brings a parachute. Another new game. Then a mad run with everyone holding on, spinning across the field. Then exhaustion. Cloud watching. A sigh. A song. ■

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Bernie De Koven, games designer and play facilitator, works with individuals and institutions to design games for their needs and help them integrate play with their lives. He founded and is associated with the Games Preserve (R.D. 1, Orchard Road, Fleetwood, Pennsylvania 19522), a twenty-five acre gathering place for people to experiment with and share play.