

Foreword to The Well-Played Game

Eric Zimmerman

If we can't let go of our games, we can't hold on to each other.

Bernie DeKoven is the closest thing we have to a shaman of play.

Not too long ago, I was privileged to take part in a New Games event led by Bernie. On a brisk afternoon in the Netherlands, a few dozen players stood outside in a circle. With the boundless panache of a practiced ringmaster and the eternal patience of a kindergarten teacher, Bernie taught us several games.

Bernie led by example, always reminding us that we could change the rules to suit the moment, or that we could exit the game whenever we wanted. Attuned to the spirit of the group, he flowed effortlessly from one game to another, tweaking a ruleset to make a game feel better, always somehow knowing exactly when it was time to move on.

He wove his spell. Or, rather, we wove it together. As we threw animal gestures across the air, raced like hell with locked knees to capture enemies, and became a single blind organism with a forest of groping hands, Bernie helped us massage our play into a more beautiful shape. In a short space of time, jaded gamers, know-it-all developers, and standoffish academics became squealing, sweating, smiling purveyors of play.

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 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.

Play is for players

Bernie DeKoven has spent his life investigating the relationships between being playful and being human. And the Well-Played Game is a masterwork – a skeleton key for unlocking your soul and letting the play flow in and out.

As books about games go, it does not fit the mold. The Well-Played Game is not a set of instructions for game creators, with tips and tricks about how to craft a more successful product. It's not a lesson book for educators, filled with strategies about

how to teach better with games. And it's not written for nervous parents or cultural critics to make them feel better about playing.

So who is this book for? *The Well-Played Game – a Player's Philosophy* – is a book for *players*. It is about playing games well. And in the process of learning to play well, becoming a better person. Of course this book is also for game creators, for educators, for scholars, and for everyone else. Not just because we can all benefit from becoming better players, but because beneath Bernie's playful prose, there is a treasure trove of earth-shattering, mind-blowing ideas about games.

The Well-Played Game was originally written in 1978 - before the World Wide Web and mobile phones, before videogames came of age in 1980s arcades – hell, even before *cable television*. But nevertheless it is a book that seems more and more relevant to our increasingly game-ified and information-centric society. *The Well-Played Game* was perhaps the first book to bridge the design and play of games and look at them as deeply human phenomena. Its wisdom has much to teach those of us making, studying, teaching with, and playing games. It should be required reading for anyone taking play seriously.

If I'm playing well, I am, in fact, complete. I am without purpose because all my purposes are being fulfilled. I'm doing it. I'm making it. I'm succeeding. This is the reason for playing this game. This is the purpose of this game for me. The goals, the rules, everything I did in order to create the safety and permission I needed, were so that I could do this – so I could experience this excellence, this shared excellence of the well-played game.

Play vs. Game

Part of the wonder and insight of Bernie's book is how it frames and re-frames essential questions of games and play. Among those of us that study games professionally, a division often arises between those that choose to focus on *games* – their elegant rules and challenging systems; and those that prefer to emphasize *play* – the experiences of players and the communities they form.

This division, between “games” and “play” is perhaps a natural outgrowth of such a radically interdisciplinary field finding its feet. But it is also a distinction that can be over-emphasized. Battle lines have been drawn: on the one hand, social scientists and cultural activists that frame games as essentially user-generated play; and on the other, the game creators and structural humanists who define games as designed systems of rules.

The Well-Played Game is the missing, magical link between these two camps.

Now at first glance, *The Well-Played Game* seems to side solidly with the forces of play. Bernie introduces fundamental ideas such as the play community, elaborating on its formation and maintenance. He encourages players to change the given rules of a game as they see fit. And he seems to advocate the idea that any one particular game is merely an occasion for players to meet up and play well together. He certainly seems to be the patron saint of play.

And yet- *The Well-Played Game* possesses a deep knowledge about how games work – a ludological expertise that rivals today’s most ardent devotees of game rules. There are pages of prose on how formal and social rules subtly enable the structure of clues in a guessing game. There is an extended digression into the dozens of ways one might begin to alter the rules of Tic-Tac-Toe. And there is a description of what it means to navigate the seas of chance in a single hand of Poker that is so eloquent it brings me to tears every time I read it.

The truth is that Bernie sees both sides of this particular coin. For him there is no “play” vs. “games” – there is only the deep mystery of their paradoxical union. He writes – for example – about how the need for the laws of rules arises directly out of the engagement between a player and a community. He describes what he calls “the playing mind” and “the gaming mind” and recognizes both of them as necessary elements of playing well: the purposeful drive to win, simultaneously with the purposelessness of playing for the sake of play. One without the other can’t produce a well-played game.

The alchemy of Bernie’s insights unifies what in other contexts seem like completely separate elements. And this is the tip of the iceberg of what this book has to offer. *The Well-Played Game* is an essential handbook for game designers, game scholars and critics, game educators and activists, and game players of all stripes. It connects us to what is meaningful in games. And remarkably, it described our time decades before it happened.

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.

The future is playful

The Well-Played Game was a book far ahead of its time. It comes from an era before the tide of digital technology rose way above our heads to become the ocean of information in which we all now swim. Bernie wrote about tabletop games, folk games, and sports – well before videogames became a central force in mass culture. Yet *The Well-Played Game* addresses many of the particulars that define our ludic century – this current age of games and play.

User-generated content; games as art; independent games. These threads of thought, teased out of the substance of play 35 years ago by Bernie have become in the last few decades part of the fabric of our time. Below are some of today's latest trends in the game world. In each case, Bernie's book has an almost eerily prescient relevance:

- **The rise of social gameplay.** In the last ten years, digital games have finally shed their overemphasis on graphics in favor of multiplayer interaction. As videogames on smartphones and social networks become prevalent, they are returning to the ancient roots of games as interpersonal play. And the Well-Played Game is nothing if not a treatise on how human beings play together.
- **Independent and experimental games.** Much of the "indie games" movement is about questioning the designed presumptions of mainstream commercial games. As a game hacker's guide, The Well-Played Game offers a plethora of strategies for how to deconstruct game designs in the pursuit of new forms of play.
- **Games as art.** Are games art? Over the past decade, countless writers have weighed in on this question. Bernie was way ahead of all of us, offering his own nuanced answer: "I think of games as social fictions, performances, like works of art, which exist only as long as they are continuously created.... At the same time, they *are* works of art, they do reflect reality."
- **The context of play.** From videogame exhibitions at major art museums to DIY game venues like Babycastles and Come Out & Play, there is an increasing emphasis today not just on games themselves, but where and how they are played. As a cookbook of meaningful play, The Well-Played Game contains endless recipes for engendering communities around games.
- **Game design as learning.** The most interesting investigations of games and education today, from the work of literacy scholar James Gee to the Quest to Learn schools, emphasize design as a model for learning. The Well-Played Game has a clear goal of teaching players to become more like designers, to learn from the activity of modifying games in order to play better.
- **Understanding addiction.** The rise of gamification and games designed to hook the minds and wallets of players has led to important debates on games and addiction. The Well-Played Game offers a unique and subtle angle on this subject. As Bernie writes, "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."
- **Tournament games.** eSports is a phenomenon with massive momentum today. The Well-Played Game takes deep competitive play quite seriously.

Bernie investigates in detail the role of coaches, spectators, and halftimes in games, from tournament Chess to professional athletics, and how they impact what it means to play games with excellence.

- **Open games.** Today's notions of user-generated content and open source development point to the ways in which games increasingly blur the lines between players and developers. This "recent" idea – that players can turn the tables and become creators – is at the heart of Bernie's book. The Well-Played game is a training manual for teaching you how to understand games as something meant to be bent, broken, and refashioned into something new.

Written nearly four decades ago, *The Well-Played Game* is a handbook for understanding games of our time. Bernie DeKoven, our shaman of play, tapped into these streams very early, opening up avenues of thought that still feel fresh today. His approaches to games and play will continue to shape thinking for decades to come.

When we have this clarity, when it is always obvious to us what we are playing for, we can play for growth, wisdom, knowledge, truth, but always for the sake of playing.

The antidote to instrumentalization

A funny thing has happened to games recently. Videogames were villainized for decades as evil sources of violence and degradation. People who didn't know much about videogames – let alone play them – dismissed them as the most despicable kind of social ill. But in the last few years – quite curiously – we've seen the reverse phenomenon. Games are now hailed as the planet's silver bullet. Almost on a daily basis, games are trumpeted as the key to humanity's survival – that they are going to fix education or curb obesity or eliminate pollution or poverty. I want to distance *The Well-Played Game* as far as possible from this kind of wishful thinking.

But why? What's wrong with the idea that games can solve the world's problems? Because the advocates for games curing the world too often instrumentalize games, and in so doing ultimately cheapen them. Their unspoken message is that games are only valuable if they have some concrete, measurable effect on society. What chef would say that cuisine is only valuable because of its nutrition? What about the taste, the smell, the presentation, the history, the culture, the dinner conversation? When we instrumentalize games in pursuit of something else, we bypass the beauty, the wonder, the *process* of play in blind pursuit of a rigid goal. As noble as that goal may be.

It might seem at first glance that *The Well-Played game* shares this impulse to harness games for a higher purpose, to leverage games for a bigger cause. But in

fact, this book you hold is actually an *antidote* to the instrumentalization of games. Bernie so often reminds us that *there is no higher purpose than play*. Like making music, creating images, or telling stories, engaging in play is what it means to be human. Games do not have to justify themselves by appealing to something outside themselves.

Bernie is not out to recruit followers to a social cause. He is not harnessing games for some great purpose. Rather than being levers for social change, games are contexts for personal growth. A place where we can get to know ourselves and each other better. And in this sense *The Well-Played Game* can help us to see how games are things of rare and great beauty.

When we play well together, we have made an embellishment, a useless, spontaneous, joyous human decoration on the shape of necessity – a piece of junk art, a beautiful graffito.

Lead on

Finally, lest I forget to mention: among all of its other profound qualities, *The Well-Played Game* is a true delight of the written word.

Reading *The Well-Played Game* feels like a conversation with a friend – a particularly smart and playful friend, who like Bernie himself never hits you over the head with his ideas. Instead, the book asks questions and suggests possible answers, winks and nudges its way through complex dilemmas, dances through stories and feelings and games themselves. It plays hard and plays fair.

As a book, *The Well-Played Game* is not a collection of facts. It is not a program to follow. It is not a list of formulas that are going to magically transform your game into a success or you into a happy person. It is instead a performance of playfulness, an example to follow, a personal notebook of one man's journey into play - that happens to be written with profound insight, generosity, and joy.

And this is why I call Bernie DeKoven our shaman of play. Not a pundit or demagogue, not a scholar or historian, not an advocate or apologist. He is a Zen master of fun, a player that has learned to play well, a pied piper we spy dancing through the regimented streets of our town, inviting us to join him.

If we are lucky, we follow the impulse of our tapping toes. We step up and dance alongside. Skipping lightly to the tune on his flute, we dance on, encouraging others to join us, and our numbers grow. We burst past the city gates, into the great rolling fields of play beyond.

We continue onward, spurred by our own momentum. We're all dancing. Or making music. Or playing. Or not playing. Deeper, into the great unknown, where not even our pied piper knows what awaits. What do you think is just over that next hill?

Let's go find out. Race you!