

## 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 every- one 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.