

Bernie DeKoven's Modest Collection of Simply Pointless Games

We begin our journey into pointlessness with a small collection of pointless games that one could only call "paradigms of pointlessness." In these games, nobody keeps score, there are hardly any rules, there are no goals, no referees, some hits, maybe, maybe even runs, but definitely no errors. Just about anybody can play them, from kids old enough to talk to grandparents wise enough to listen.

Pointless games are gateways to pointless laughter, spontaneity, creativity, invention, community, lingering, light-hearted fun.

Sitting and standing around games

The Me-We Game

Before I started playing with this game, it was called "Sound and Fury." I learned it in the latter part of the last millennium, from what was then called the New Games Foundation. The concept of the game is only somewhat reflected by the words "Sound and Fury," the true nature of the exercise far more effectively reflected by the continuation of the quote: "...signifying nothing."

This happens to be just about a perfect game for a family of say 5 or more - a two-year-old being able to play as easily as a 72 year-old.

The game begins with 5-20 people standing in a circle. Whoever is teaching the game starts it. If the teacher wants someone else to start, a randomly selected person is selected randomly. The starter makes any kind of Sound or noise that the starter deems appropriate (or in-), accompanying that Sound with a physical movement of any sort at all, a Furious movement, as the original name of the game might imply, or a gentle movement or a movement of significant subtlety. Everyone then does more or less precisely what that person did, simultaneously making sound and movement in contemporaneous synchronicity. Then the next person takes a turn.

This results in what I call the "Me-We effect." First I do something, then everybody does it; first I'm the only one acting crazy, then everyone's acting just as crazy. Then it's the next person's turn. And whatever that person does, I wind up doing, too. Whatever. And it doesn't matter. It's just fun. Pointless fun. And the longer we play it, the crazier and more fun it gets. ME (well, you) find yourself feeling more and more free to do whatever you feel like doing, without fear of criticism or interpretation or embarrassment or incidental significance. Safe in the embrace of pointlessness, you do something remarkably silly. And then everybody else (THEY) embraces you. And you make everyone feel more and more free to do whatever they feel doing. And so you all (WE) find freedom with each other.

OK. It's your turn again. Only this time, you just can't think of anything new to do. Or anything old, for that matter. So we add another freedom - the freedom to do nothing. We make it the rule that, any time you feel so moved, you can say "freeforall" or "farfel nuggets" or whatever everyone decides is the appropriately silly-sounding thing to call it. And then, whenever someone passes, everybody does anything at all. All together. And then it's the next person's turn. Which turns out to be even greater fun.

And, speaking of turns, who says that you have them? What if anyone could have a go whenever?

And speaking of standing in a circle, what would happen if everyone was sitting down, or lying down even?

Adventures in Handland

Which brings us to the happy contemplation of the pithily pointless game you might as well call "Handland."

So, there you are, lying down, on your back, ear, in fact, to ear, with heads on either side of you. You are in what, from an observer's perspective, one might call a wagon-wheel-like configuration - heads at the hub, feet, spokes.

As soon as you're all comfortable, put your hands in the air above your heads. Suddenly, almost magically, you find yourself in a world of fingers and palms and wrists to play in and with.

If everyone had a puppet on each hand, it'd be like a puppet theater-in-the-round. Of course, you can pretend their hands are puppets, even without having any puppet-covering. And you can talk to each other in puppetlike voices, engage in puppet-like battles, discuss the relevance of reality with puppet-like absurdity.

You could, if so moved, play some kind of extremely complex paddy-cake game. Or you could just dance: rock, punk, square, circle.

Of course, ultimately, you're going to get tired of holding your hands up in the air. The blood pooling thing, don't you know. So you get your feet to join in the fray, creating what could only be called "Limbland."

Ultimately, unavoidably, it will prove too much to sustain. Legs and arms exhausted into pins and needles of wobbly mirth, the game simply ends. Without any goal being reached, any points being gathered, any purpose being accomplished. Players left with a feeling of having created a moment of great, deep, profound, freeing fun.

Making Waves

Familiar to anyone attending or viewing sports exhibitions, Wave-Making is something fans seem to enjoy doing when nothing else is. To make a wave, one person in a row of sitting people stands up. When the person to his or her right or left begins to stand, the person who initiated the Wave begins to sit down. And so on, et cetera, all the way down the line, making, as an observer once noted, waves.

What if we had more than one wave going at the same time? Two waves, perhaps, each going in a different direction? What if every fifth person started a wave, with one of the people on either side of the wave-initiator semi-

spontaneously deciding the direction in which the wave should be carried? What if they not only stood, but also made a gesture of some kind, accompanied by a sound of some kind, in a manner reminiscent of the ME-WE game?

Making waves is the kind of pointlessly fun activity you might find, given the appropriate permission, in auditoriums or school cafeterias or airports, even. And yet, such permission is rarely if ever granted. Hence, it's inclusion herein.

Making Waves doesn't have to involve standing and sitting. One could play it lying down as in Handland or Limbland, or sitting and just using one's arms, which offers an intriguing opportunity for those of us who have two arms to have a two-part part in wave-making, raising first one arm, and then, whilst slowly lowering said arm, raising the next.

Or perhaps with just fingers. Sitting down. Hands down around a table. Raising only our fingers - pinky-to-thumb-to-thumb-to-pinky to the next person's thumb...

And if we didn't have a table, and were just sitting on chairs, in a circle, knee to knee, and I placed my left hand on the knee of the person on my left, my right hand on the knee of the person on my right, whilst the people on either side of me did the same, crossing wrists... we could make finger-waves, one hand at a time, in a hilariously unnecessarily complicated manner, from time to time discovering how, given this bizarre position, quite deliciously difficult it can become to distinguish one's hand from the person's next to one.

Then there's finger waves. Perhaps even toe waves.

Follow the Follower

"Follow the Follower" is very much like Follow the Leader, on the one hand, and on the other, not.

You begin with everyone standing in a circle. You could just as easily be sitting in a circle, or kneeling in a circle, or, if not a circle, an oval, or a square with rounded corners. Far more creative configurations are available to those playing

in a gravity free environment.

All configurations require at least three people, unless you're standing in front of a mirror, in which case you'll need to create your own variation.

At some mutually agreed upon point, everybody starts walking in a circle. Ambling, strolling, sauntering, moseying, promenading, hopping, jogging, skipping, and related forms of perambulation are all well within the recommended initial movement guidelines.

And some other point, everybody secretly appoints the person immediately in front as the leader - following that person's movements as precisely and faithfully as possible. In practice, however, exactitude proves impossible, which is good because actual exactitude is much less amusing than approximate exactitude.

Follow the Follower is one of an entire genre of pointless games in which the desire to have fun is far more reliable than the need for precise rule-following or actual skill.

Playing Follow the Follower, you might find yourself reminded of other circular pastimes such as those followed by religious circles, political circles, sewing circles, etc. Commenting further on these similarities, however, would detract from the pointlessness of this exercise.

Bernie Found Nirvana

When I first learned this game, it was called "Johnny Went to Sleep."

Again with the standing in the circle. Again the 5-20 people.

One player starts. He says "Johnny went to sleep." Everyone then asks, in unison, the eternal question: "How did Johnny Go to Sleep." Player One then says "Johnny Went to Sleep Like this, Like this." While he's saying "Like this, like this," he makes a repetitive motion of any sort with any part of his body he can move repetitively. Maybe he winks. Maybe he nods. Maybe he waves his hand. Maybe he shuffles a foot. Everybody then says: "Johnny went to sleep like this,

like this," doing exactly what Player One did.

Now it's Player Two's turn. Wait a minute. Did anybody tell you to stop moving "like this"? I don't think so. Once a movement is started, it just doesn't stop. So, whatever new motion Player Two wants to do, she has to add it to the motion that Player One started.

And then Player Three adds yet another motion, and then Player Four, and on and theoretically on.

In practice, however, people soon run out - either of movable body parts, or of breath. And the game usually stops there.

I, of course, changed the game.

First I changed the name. When I was working with business teams, I called it "Bernie Called a Meeting." When I was working with spiritually oriented folk, it became "Bernie Found Nirvana." I also suggested that each person use his or her name, real or fictional. So, if Player Two wanted to be called Alice, then he'd say "Alice Found Nirvana."

I also discovered that people really never could remember what they were supposed to say, so I changed the chant like, uh, this:

Bernie: "Bernie Found Nirvana." Everybody: "How did Bernie find Nirvana."

Bernie: "Bernie found Nirvana like this like this like this." Everybody: "Like this, like this."

Like this?

Well, then, you might like Dada Dodo Didi Dum even better

.

Dada Dodo Didi Dum

Whereas "Bernie Found Nirvana" is more of a chanting-with-motion game, "Dada Dodo Didi Dum" is more or less a singing-with-motion game. And you can play it sitting down. Ah, at last. Sitting. You can, of course, sit down on a chair. Or on

the floor or lawn or something. In a circle, again of course.

I first learned of this game as "Dum Dum Da Da" when it was sung to the tune of "Old Man River." I have, as you might have guessed, taken the appropriate liberties.

Dada Dodo Didi Dum is sung to the tune of "ABCDEFGG" or perhaps "Baa Baa Black Sheep Have You Any Wool" or equally "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." More about that later.

Players accompany the song with motions. On "dada" they make a motion that involves the person next to them - patting the back, tapping the knees, scratching the head - touches of similar gentle ilk. On "dodo" they do the same to themselves. On "didi" to the person on the other side. And once more to themselves on "dum." This all gets repeated six times, until the conceptual "sing with me" or "three bags full" or "what you are" has been reached.

And now, we enter stage two.

Some player, whoever is so moved, creates a new motion, similar in left-center-right-center reciprocity, but easily distinguishable from the previous motion. This new movement is then performed for the entire song's-worth. Finally (or perhaps not), the third movement is created and performed.

All of this is but prelude.

Once more the song entire is repeated, but this time, incorporating all three movements: the back-patting commencing on the "ABC" and continuing all the way through "what you are," the knee-patting from the "One for the..." to the "V," and the head-scratching from the "twinkle" to the "three bags full."

After this round, just as the group is suffused with the inscrutably lovely feeling of almost significant accomplishment, you can then descend into more profound levels of pointless chaos: either add three more motions, or try it while singing in rounds, or perhaps while singing all three songs simultaneously, in rounds, with six different motions.

Walking and running around games

Eclipse

OK. So enough already with the circle games. Here's the first of several exemplarily pointless walking-around games. Walking around games are especially attractive when playing with larger groups, as a case in point of the more-the-merrier condition.

This one is based on a game I found in a book called [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) by Augusto Boal. I call it "Eclipse," or, if I'm feeling particularly esoteric, "Ecliptic."

We begin the game with everyone walking around, sauntering randomly from pillar to post, from hither to thither or yon. At some time, some self-appointed leader-like person (usually me) says "find your sun," meaning that everyone should imagine that one person in the group is their own personal sun. Of course, this fact is never divulged to one's personal sun. It is merely decided upon internally and then acted upon externally. From that time until the game is over, the goal is to stay in your personal sunshine. Since everyone, including everyone's imaginary sun, is still generally milling, there is ample incentive for even more frantically general milling.

The leader-like person then suggests that the general millers include a moon in their imaginary solar system. Again, everyone selects their personal moon, again internally without outward sign or verbal divulgement. For the rest of the game, the goal becomes to stay within one's private ecliptic - positioning oneself so that one's self-selected moon is between oneself and one's chosen sun.

Now, because we have what some astronomers call the "three-body problem," millers find themselves milling ever more rapidly. Their sun is moving. Their moon is moving. And they are moving, nay, scurrying, perhaps even running amuckly, trying ever so diligently to keep their appointed moon between themselves and their selected sun until the person generally acknowledged to be

the leader says "freeze."

At which time everyone stops moving, points to their moon with one hand, and their sun with another, and those who find themselves uncannily positioned so that their moon is between themselves and their sun can consider themselves "winners."

They could, you know, lie. I mean, no one really knows who chose whom to be what. But, because there is no point in winning, there is similarly no point in lying. Which is, as a matter of fact, a great relief for all.

Nor is there any particular significance in being someone's chosen sun or, for that matter, moon. Yet, as the game progresses, the collective imagination becomes so marvelously vivid that surprisingly merry mayhem unavoidably ensues.

Pru (and the concept of "Minimal Cheating")

I think I might have made this game up. I thought I read about it in a book about games from many cultures, in the section about games from Holland. I have since not been able to find that book. And when I visited Holland, I couldn't find anyone who heard of the game. I eventually taught it at a New Games Tournament, it was then described in the New Games Book, disseminated to the alternative-fun-seeking world, and remains one of my favorite walking-around games. In fact, it has become such a favorite that I have noted in myself a marked propensity for launching into an evermore dramatic narrative about the significance of the Prui and general Pruidom.

Begin the game by asking everyone to close their eyes and start milling around - milling should, as all proper milling, be aimless and random and, insofar as this is eyes-closed milling, slow and sensitive.

I comment for a moment about the eyes-closed thing:

You could have blindfolds for everyone. Then you and everyone would be conceptually assured that you would all be equally in the dark, the shared

darkness being a significant factor in making this game as fun as it is. I, on the other hand, prefer to ask people simply to close their eyes. I even frequently find myself using this very opportunity to opine about something I call "minimal cheating." Since people are walking around with their eyes closed they feel somewhat at risk, exposed, threatened, perhaps. I suggest, therefore, that if people feel uncomfortable enough, they open and close their eyes, very, very briefly, camera-shutter-like. It's cheating. But if it's done quickly enough, it's minimal, and doesn't distract from overmuch from the various joys of blind milling.

When people bump into each other, as they unavoidably must, they shake hands, while saying "prui." If the person they encounter is not the chosen Prui, they each go off to find someone else. On the other hand, when someone bumps into the actual, pre-appointed Prui, she shakes the proffered hand, as normal, says prui, as instructed, but the Prui a) doesn't say anything, and b) doesn't let go. Now both people are Prui, remaining connected in their corporate Pruidom until the end of the game. If either of them is encountered by anyone else, they remain silent, smug in their inscrutably Pruidom, using their free hand to shake hands as more people are added to the Prui.

Here again some minimal cheating might be advocated. After all, you are walking around with your eyes closed. And if you're part of the Prui, holding hands with two different people, you have nothing to protect yourself from the inadvertent grope (we trust, of course, that by the time everyone's ready to play this game advertent gropers have matured beyond that particular need). Thus, you might feel the need to absent yourself from Pruieness for a nonce or two, and open your eyes. By all means, do so. But endeavor to do so briefly, very, very briefly.

Further, once people find themselves found, they often also find themselves sorely tempted to open their eyes for longer than one would consider a minimal moment. Thus I frequently find myself commenting on how the longer everyone can keep one's eyes closed, the more fun it is when the game is over.

This reminds me: Frequently, people ask me "how do you know if you are the Prui?" This is a most reasonable query. I respond thusly: "I, as leader pro-temp,

will either whisper into someone's ear something like "you are the Prui," or wait until a self-appointed Prui emerges.

Sometimes, this results in the spontaneous generation of two or several Prui-groups. Which, though you might not think so at the time, seeing as it blatantly desecrates the unspoken hope that all will ultimately find themselves part of one undivided Prui, nevertheless results in a gregarious gathering of group glee.

The game continues until more or less everyone has become Prui, at which time they can finally open their eyes and become profoundly amused by discovering who is holding on to whom. Until then, there are some exceptionally fun moments as more and more people feel their way towards pruiness. It gets quieter and quieter while the plaintive sounds of the unpruied few saying "Pru!" becomes more and more distinct.

Glass Cobra (and the principal of Constructive Quitting)

Should Prui, given the grope-potential, prove a bit extreme, there's always Glass Cobra, another game from the playful genius of Augusto Boal.

The game begins with everyone standing in a circle with their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them.

Players are advised to get to know the shoulders of that person. This inevitably leads to something like a mutual massage and sighs of universal happiness. Depending on the degree of shared deliciousness, you can, if you want, stop there.

I prefer to go on, because the game itself is at least as much fun.

Next, I tell players to close their eyes. This is somewhat natural, as they are probably by now in a state of only somewhat mitigated bliss.

Next, after the appropriate ahh has sufficiently transpired, I tell them to drop their hands, but to keep their eyes closed.

I then issue several instructions, the purpose of which is to: 1) change the

position of people enough so that no one is standing in the same position relative to the person who was in front, and 2) create a careful measured amount of conceptual mayhem.

Exemplary instructions may include: "Take two steps to your right." "Turn 27-degrees clockwise." "Take 1.5 side steps to your left." "Slide one giant-step north-by-northwest."

Once everyone is sufficiently disoriented, or, more positively, reoriented, and reminded most clearly to keep their eyes closed until further instructed, I suggest that their next logical goal would be to find the shoulders they once knew so intimately, and rejoin, so that all, still with their eyes closed, almost uncannily conclude in the same position, in the same circle of shared sensual bliss.

As a general rule, before I actually start a game, I encourage people who think they might not want to play to do that very thing - not play. I call it "Constructive Quitting." This can be very useful for everyone, especially when playing games like Prui and Glass Cobra, where people are walking around in the simulated dark. The Constructive Quitters can help reorient people who have strayed too far from the action, or who are about to wander into a stairwell or into some potentially painful protuberance. It is useful to the Quitters because it gives them a chance to observe and to reaffirm their commitment to play. And it is very useful to me, because I can be reassured that the only people who are actively engaged are the people who want to be so. More about this much later.

*Pointlessly standing, walking, or running around games with
someone or several who is or are IT*

The following games are arranged in descending order of rowdiness. The first being the most rowd-inducing.

Knee to Elbow

I first learned of this game as "People to People." I never quite liked calling it that, because it doesn't quite reflect how personally the game can be taken. So, for

the time being, at least, I'm calling it "Knee to Elbow." It is another more-the-merrier type game.

Every player except one has a partner. The player without a partner is "IT" - which, depending on your perspective, is what you don't want, or want to be.

If, after everyone has claimed a partnership, there is no one left over, then you are IT. If not, then you should be sure that you are the one without a partner, so that you can at least start the game.

You start the game by naming any two body parts. Since some body parts are more, shall we say, "sensitive," than others, there is a significant range of risqueness available to you. You, of course, being the model of decency that you are, choose the less risqué. Such as "knee to elbow."

When you say "knee to elbow" each pair should adopt the classic double knee-to-elbow position, thereby assuring that player A's elbow is making contact with the player B's knee, whilst player B's knee is making contact with player A's elbow.

You could just as easily have said "head to toe." If you had, you would have quantifiably increased the collective mirth as people found themselves ultimately on the floor, or standing in acute precariousness.

"Back to back," "Neck to chin," "Finger to nose," each results in a different degree of intimacy and shared perplexity.

At any time - I usually wait until people have assumed a position that is egregiously intertwined - you can say something like "change partnerships" and everyone must separate and find a new partner. Of course, while everyone is so engaged, you also find a new partner, leaving someone else in the enviable or non-enviable position of being IT.

Here's the thing about being IT. At some time, for just about everyone, it's more fun to be IT than to try not to be IT. So for an IT-aspiring person, the goal become to really look as though they're trying their very darnedest not to be IT,

running both to and fro in apparent desperation to find the perfect partner, when in fact doing their best to avoid success. You may remark to yourself all you want: "o," you might internally say, "how shameful, these IT-avoiders are," or "how sad that they should be pursuing ITness when the great fun of it all is only available to those who get to touch body parts." But people are as people do. In time, they will find where the greater joy truly lies. But, until then, it is best if you avoid drawing attention to their subtle IT-seeking strategies, and allow them the learning opportunity. Who knows, they might be very skilled in their ITness, bringing themselves and everyone else more fun.

The game continues until the combinations of partners and positions, and the players themselves are sufficiently exhausted, and much healing, and intimate laughter ensues.

Toaster, Iwo Jima, Last Supper (One IT, two ITs, more fun for all)

For this and the next game, you should have more than 8 and fewer than 30 people to play with. If you have more, you should consider breaking into two groups, both playing simultaneously. Fewer, you should maybe consider something else.

People stand in a circle. One (or, as we shall discuss later, two) person (or people) is (or are) IT.

IT is in the center.

IT turns to any person in the circle and says something like "Toaster."

As everyone knows from the rule-explaining-and-practice session that has begun the game, if you are selected, you put your hand out, in Toaster-handle-position. The person next to you, towards whom your hand is extended, presses your hand down, whereupon you squat, tick for a bit, and pop-up, in a satisfying toaster-like manner. You have the choice of extending having your handle on the left or right, so that you can, should you be so moved, surprise your erstwhile partner.

IT then turns to someone else, again saying something like "Toaster." Or,

perhaps, "Iwo Jima."

In the Iwo Jima instance, the person being pointed assumes the position of the flag holder, the person to that person's right, the position of the flag planter, and the person to the flag holder's left the flag reacher. Whoever does the thing that appears clearly to be wrong becomes IT for the next round.

Then there's Last Supper. This involves everyone. The person in the middle assumes the position of the Divinity. The people on the right and left any position they think mirrors that of someone in the painting. There's clearly a lot of leeway allowed, since no one really remembers the whole painting. However, should further exploration and position-definition be desired, all attempts should be made to pursue this until collective perfection is reached, or the pointlessness of perfection-attempting made sufficiently vivid.

As to the number of people being IT: In larger groups, you want at least two people IT. This accomplishes several goals simultaneously. It de-emphasizes the desirability of being IT (there's less attention being focused on the IT role). It reduces the possible embarrassment of being the one who makes a mistake. It engages more players. And it adds a valuable element of joyous chaos of it all.

As the game progresses, players should be invited to create more configurations - involving one, two, three, four or all players. Draw freely from TV shows (Charlie's Angels), historical paintings (Spirit of 76), abstract art (Guernica). Be careful not to get carried away in configuration design lest you exceed the collective figure-making competencies of the group. On the other hand, pointless is as pointless does.

Adverbially

Adverbially is derived from an old parlor game. Old parlor games, properly modified, being yet another wonderful source of pointlessness.

As in any old parlor, you have a bunch of people sitting around on chairs and sofas and maybe the floor, in something roughly equal to a circle. You'd probably want at least six people to play with. Twice or even three times as many would

be equally swell.

Two people are IT. Yes, you could have only one person IT, but this is one of those IT games that is really more fun for everyone when there are two ITs. Because it's a guessing game, and, as IT, it tends to feel like everyone else is kind of *against* you. They know something (what you're supposed to guess) that you don't. And they won't tell you. So if there's someone else with you, you feel less alone. And so you have more fun. And so does everyone else.

When the ITs are clearly out of the parlor (family room, dining room, whatever) and similarly out of earshot, everyone decides on an adverb. Adverbs generally end in LY. Hence, the name of the game. Words like: confidently, skilfully, eagerly, solemnly, drunkenly. These are all good adverbs. Words like ugly are not. Some adverbs might prove almost impossible to guess exactly, like, for example, meticulously. So it's wise to make it a house rule that anything close enough is acceptable. Closeness can vary, of course, depending on the skills of the players.

When the adverb has been selected, the people who are IT are invited back into the circle.

They then address individuals, pairs or the entire group, asking them to do things (comb your hair, pretend to eat, shake someone's hands, introduce yourself) the way you'd do them, given the adverb. Thus, people would pretend to eat or shake hands or comb their hair drunkenly, if such were the adverb selected.

The people who are IT can ask people to do things that are opposite the way the adverb would indicate (soberly). Or, if need be, ask people to do anything at all that demonstrates the adverb.

Everyone attempts assiduously to comply, thus demonstrating both acting ability and compassion.

When the adverb is finally guessed, the old ITs choose the new ITs, and the game goes on, and potentially on.