

Twenty children on a street in the city. It is Spring, just after dinner. Suddenly, something begins pulling them together. They cluster near a wide stoop. There is a cry of "Not It!" Then silence.

They cluster more tightly. They close their eyes. One body is released: a boy, about ten. His eyes are open. He has a belt in his hand. He is running back and forth across the street; stopping every so often - near steps, a truck, an abandoned car, an apartment door. He circles around the group. I can hear some giggles, some "hurry-ups." The boy is now walking on tiptoe towards the group. His hands are empty. Everyone else's eyes are closed. He is right next to them now. "Hot Bread and Butter," he says, "come and get your supper."

The children scatter like an exploded lightbulb, shattering into screams. Some stay close to each other. Others gallop into the frontier, probing the darkest secrets of the street. More screams. Someone has found the belt! There she is, rushing around, twirling the belt over her head like a lariat, hitting everybody who dares be near. Everyone races home. Until the last one herds himself into the cowering mass. Laughter. Finally silence. Eyes closed. Listening. She hides the belt.

"Hot Bread and Butter," among other things, represents an idea of power. To gain power, you must 1) take certain risks, and 2) be lucky. Alliances don't seem to be of much help. Those who stay too close to home don't have much fun. Whoever is brave enough to leave home behind, and lucky enough to find the belt, gets to hide the belt next time.

You gain power through risk and luck - not through direct confrontation - but only once the power has already been left for you to find. As a child grows towards adulthood, he ranges further and further away from home, approaching the time in which adult power is left to him - if he can find it. But it is the opportunity that he must seize, there is no person to confront. The power of an adult cannot be taken from an adult, it must be discovered within the person of the child. Whoever wishes to be safe can stay as close to the base as necessary. Some children never get hit. They also never get the belt.

Baseball in streets and hallways, basketball in the bathroom, golf in the gutter, and dinner table Olympics

I decided to call this talk: "Baseball in streets and hallways, basketball in the bathroom, golf in the gutter, and dinner table Olympics" Originally, it was going to be "what street games mean to me." I elucidate:

I have learned to see children's street games as scripts for a kind of children's cultural theater. I see them as collective dreams in which certain themes are being toyed with - investigated and manipulated for the sake of sheer catharsis or some future reintegration into a world view. They are reconstructions of relationships - simulations - which are guided by individual players, instituted by the groups in which they are played or abstracted by the traditions of generations of children. They are performed wherever children can play without supervision in a theater where the world is the stage.

In this presentation, I hope to share with you a little of what I've been doing with street games over the last 40 years, where I have taken them, where they have taken me. My purpose - to entertain and inspire you, and hopefully to encourage and support you in your explorations of street games in all their nuances and significances.

Street games are changed by the people who play them. That is what distinguishes them from sports, and from the majority of games played in classrooms and gyms and physical education classes and recreation centers and clubs for children. They are constantly being invented and reinvented. That is also what makes them all but impossible to codify. And, according to what I have learned, what makes them so important to understand.

The people who participate in street games are simultaneously players and designers, referees, cheerleaders, and spectators. The equipment they use, like the places they play in, are ad hoc - they play in somebody's backyard or basement or living room, in vacant lots, alleys, cul-de-sacs, fields, playgrounds - wherever they can play without supervision. They use sticks and rocks, toys and tin cans, whatever they can find or make or repurpose.

Thanks to the Dutch filmmaker Jules Oosterwiegel, I can show you what I am talking about in this clip from his Playtime DVD - a children's game called Deweke as played by some children in Botswana. (clip)



I am sure that there are hundreds of variations of this game, in Botswana, as well as throughout the world. Here, for example, the game of "Filling the Bottle." from Zimbabwe (3) [clip](#)



My interest in street games began a little over 40 years ago, when I was developing a curriculum in theater for elementary school children in Philadelphia. I was looking for the kind of theater that was most familiar to children - one that they created on their own, that they participated in, that they valued. Since I was working with school age children, they were, for the most part, already past the age of the most obviously theater-like, sociodramatic games like "school" and "house" and "doctor." Though clearly theatrical, school age kids, at least when

they were in school together, thought those games too "babyish" to play in public, school-wise.

On the other hand, hand-clapping games, chasing games, games with tops and marbles, rope and jacks, were very much part of their daily reality, and, as I came to learn, very theatrical. Like, for example, Hide the Belt.

The first time I played it with the kids, it struck me as your typical kids' game - fun, dangerous, maybe, but with really no relevance to the higher dramatic arts. After a while, when the kids let me play, too, I discovered that this was in deed a kind of theater we were playing with. Theater of an unerringly real kind.

The more I learned about street games, the more respect I gained for how well-structured they are, yet how flexible, how fun and often how remarkably profound. I asked the children to teach me their games. I played. I learned. I began to scour the library for collections of children's games. I discovered a book called: "Children's Games in Street and Playground: Chasing, Catching, Seeking, Hunting, Racing, Dueling, Exerting, Daring, Guessing, Acting, and Pretending" compiled by Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford, 1969), which proved to be not only a great resource, but also a collection of inspiring insights into the power of games and the nature of the street community. Which led me to the playground, and to TASP, and now to you - where I find myself once again addressing my mentors, once more attempting to express my heartfelt appreciation for the devotion, the wisdom, the courage that has led each of you to making a life's work from the serious exploration of play.

Eventually, my curriculum, which I called "Interplay," grew to 5 volumes, and I was well on my way to my life's work (which, of course, was play). I explored every connection I could find to play and games, investigated every role that was open to me - designer, teacher, writer, theoretician, practitioner.

Let me show you an example of what became my "work." (clip) (from Laughter Games Workshop)



Here I am, in Israel, teaching adults a game I learned as "Estray Bonajour." No, I don't remember where I learned it or where it came from. I've been teaching it for maybe 30 years. We're playing, coincidentally, with balls made out of plastic bags. As you'll note, right after I got them to play what I thought of as "my game," they taught me their version of the very same game.

Now here's a remarkably similar game that I found, 30 years later, when watching Oosterweigel's DVD. Estray Bonajour, as played in Brazil - called "Escravas du Jo." (clip)



Similar, but not identical. Different enough so that each version has something to offer players - a variation, a slightly different way to play. Different hand gestures. Penalties for the player who makes a mistake. Should the players know each of these variations, they'll have an additional choice - not only to decide whether or not to play this particular game, but also how to play it, which, of the many possible ways of playing the game, sounds like most fun.

Most of the children who play street games find themselves having to change their games in order to meet the various exigencies of play - playing on the sidewalk is different from playing on a carpet or at a table. Playing with people of the same age is different from playing with older kids, or younger kids, or adults, or kids with different physical or mental abilities. Playing in a crowded playground, where others can join or where there are other games going on is again different. The rules for hide and seek are different if you're playing in the daytime, or in the dark, in the street, in the house - each variation in the environment in which a game is played or population playing it, leads to variations in the game itself.

The variability of street games and the circumstances in which they are played

makes it possible, and often necessary, for the players to change the game they are playing - to choose an established variation or invent a new one. To evoke or create rules which compensate for the environment in which, and the people with whom they are playing. Like the "do over" rule when a particular play wasn't clear, or the "interference" rule that deals with a car goes through the playing area, or a telephone wire that prevents the ball from taking its hoped for trajectory.

Children have little choice over the composition of the communities in which they find themselves. They may not especially like each other, or where they find themselves able to play, but they can only play with what they are given. Children make up their own games, or just think they are, because it is far easier for them to change the game than it is to change the people they are playing with.

All of these vicissitudes create the conditions in which players must also be designers. And when the players are the authors of the games they are playing, they are also the authorities who can determine how to make the game better. As veteran game designer Garry Shirts says: "the people who learn most from the game are the ones who get to design it."

As I continued following this path - teaching, adapting and creating games that, like street games, are, in some part, designed by the people who play them, I was invited, by a publisher called "Human Kinetics" to write a book that had something to do with my work. Human Kinetics is primarily a publisher of books for physical education. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity to create a guide that would give kids a chance to make up their own games. Since most physical educators know next to nothing about game invention, and since it's not easy, even for kids, I eventually arrived at a concept I called Junkyard Sports. Taking from what I understood about the nature of street games, my book contained more than 70 examples of sports played with the "wrong" equipment in the "wrong" environment with the "wrong" people - basketball played by kids and seniors in a hallway with balls made out of socks and baskets made out of grocery bags, soccer played on a set of stairs with ping pong balls and tennis racquets. The objective: to give kids and their teachers the tools and the inspiration that are fundamental to the street game experience.

I found the framing of "junkyard sports" to be an extremely useful tool with adults as well as children. Part of my work, as you saw from the clip of my playing in Israel, involves helping adults explore their own playfulness. Given the success of Junkyard Sports, I designed a team-building game I called "Junkyard Olympics." The challenge - given a collection of whatever junk you might find around you, and a field made up of conference tables, how could you create something closely resembling the Olympics?

Playing Junkyard Olympics with executives and managers, parents and caregivers, I found I could provide them with an opportunity to explore the

dynamics of shared creativity, teamwork, and community-building central to the street game experience, while arriving at many good reasons for laughing together. It turned out to be a game that was as healing as it was instructive, helping people cross corporate and social boundaries and create communities that could support playful interaction and genuinely creative thinking.

Had we but world enough, and time, I'd conclude my keynote with an actual, highly instructive, and patently fun experience of the game. Insofar as we have neither, I wrap us up with a brief slideshow of the game as played last year with executives and consultants of the LEGO corporation. ([slideshow](#))



I tried to make my presentation brief enough so that we'd have a little time to talk together, so that I could speak more directly to your interests, so that I could once again express my gratitude, and semi-religious awe for the powers that led each of you to making a life's work out of play and playgrounds, games, toys and similarly significant frivolities.