Deep Fun and the Theater of Games
An Interview with Bernie DeKoven

Bernie DeKoven is both a play theorist and a play practitioner. He is the author of *The Well-Played Game* (reissued in 2013 by MIT Press) as well as *Junkyard Sports*, *Power Meetings*, and *Connected Executives* and of the compact disc *Recess for the Soul*, an assemblage of monologues about playful meditation. *A Playful Path*, his most recent work, is a collection of essays from his popular blog *deepFUN*. In 2014 he teamed with the improv organization ComedySportz Indianapolis to stage his interactive show *Play's the Thing*. DeKoven developed the interplay curriculum for Philadelphia's public schools, and he has devised electronic games for toy and games manufacturers such as Ideal Toy Company, Children's Television Workshop, Mattel Inc., and CBS software. This earned him an Ifil-Raynolds Award from the North American Simulation and Gaming Association. In 1971 De Koven founded The Games Preserve, a retreat center in Eastern Pennsylvania dedicated to the exploration of games and play. In this interview, De Koven talks about the virtues of playful play and discusses the roots of playfulness, the power of shared imagination, the joys of performing, the difference between schooling and learning, the perils of play deprivation, and the gentle, comic, restorative mischief of noncompetitive games. **Key words:** game design; improvisation; playful play, teaching games; The Games Preserve

American Journal of Play: Did your childhood experiences lead you to an interest in play?

Berne DeKoven: They must have. It is difficult to determine what impact my parents had. My father played games with me when I was young. He loved chess and bridge and had many books and studied chess passionately. He also played word games with me and invented his own variation on a spelling game. He was very competitive, though. And that also must have impacted my particular focus on playfulness. When it came to rough-and-tumble play with my peers, I could do the tumble part, but the rough part proved deeply unsatisfying to my inner being. This is when I began to

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develop my sense of humor in which, of course, can be found the roots of playfulness. We also moved around a lot, and I think this contributed to the promotion of my wittiness, and all those playful-like skills that contributed to my ability to make (and sadly leave) friends.

AJP: Who have been your best playmates?

DeKoven: My best playmates didn't come along until I met my wife and had my children. I had some good playmates before, though, and I remember having the most fun with them making up adventures in vacant lots. There were kids who liked to play board games with me and some great action games. (I had a game of electric football that I really loved, because you could twiddle forever with the two metal tabs that somehow determined how fast and in what direction each player would move). But the best of my playmates were those with whom I could share and build fantasies. I grew to boyhood shortly after World War II ended, and I found myself having the most fun with people I could shoot and who would not only acknowledge that they were dead but could also die with dramatic vividness. Pretend dying is fantastic fun.

AJP: What are some of the ways you played when you reached adulthood?

DeKoven: Theater, poetry, and making up games are my life's consistent themes. My meandering and sometimes muddy career path began with writing poetry and acting in plays at my high school, Omaha Central, where I also wrote an often silly humor column for the school paper. After taking a few theater courses at Temple University, I fell in love with improvisational theater though I preferred improvising without an audience. After travelling to Israel, where I met the woman I married five years later, I found myself far enough away from my family to discover myself. I burned my poetry after that trip, but I retained an interest in improvisation and began teaching it to kids at a place called the Arts Forum in Philadelphia. This led to a job teaching fifth grade in Media, Pennsylvania (Media! Who knew?), that gave me enough freedom to develop my own curriculum, maybe a little bit too much as I come to think of it.

AJP: How did you come to develop the Interplay Curriculum for schools in Philadelphia, and what were its chief components?

DeKoven: That was in 1968. The School District of Philadelphia had just opened a new experimental magnet school. It was a time of ample funding for experiments like these. This school was given something like a quarter-million dollars to build a beautiful theater in the round with parquet floors,

carpeted risers, sound and lighting booth, and dressing rooms. I was given the responsibility to develop a theater curriculum for elementary school children. I started, naturally, with theater games and exercises, and the kids kind of liked them. After a while, they started calling me "Mr. Drama." I did research and uncovered a wonderful book on teaching improvisation by Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*. That led to my developing a very large collection of games, and it proved to be my first step into exploring the importance of children's games. I wanted most to discover and build up the kind of theater that kids used with each other in everyday exchanges. Those kids taught me about games along the way, and their teaching pretty much became my life's work.

AJP: How did it go?

DeKoven: Not so well at first. About six months into this, I began to get a little concerned about the efficacy of my whole approach. The kids seemed to enjoy the theater games, but as soon as I had to leave the area, for a minute even, the kids would just stop whatever they were doing and kind of wander around disconsolately. I say "kind of," but in fact sometimes they got into fights and other such bad-kid stuff. So I made it my aim and my criterion for success to find something that was theater-like, that the kids seemed to like, and that the kids would still be doing when I walked out of the room for a minute and then came back in. After another couple months of experiment and frustration, I pretty much gave up, and out of something similar to desperation, I asked the kids if there was *anything* they'd actually like to do. I first asked this of a group of first graders. And their almost immediate response was: "Play a game!" "But," I countered, "we've been playing games ever since we started." "Not those kind of games," said the kids. "Real games, like, you know, Duck-Duck-Goose." "Oh," thought I, "*those* kinds of games—the *unjustifiable* kind." I decided to let them have their way, this once, in the deep hope that the principal wouldn't be visiting us at that particular time.

AJP: Did it work?

DeKoven: Well, I applied my test: I walked out of the area, stayed out for a couple of minutes (not just one but a couple!), and when I came back in, sure enough, they were still playing. So I left again. Five minutes later. Still playing. And the next time I came back, one of the kids asked me if I wanted to play too. Luckily, I did. I really did. And so we played, and I learned about the real, deep, sometimes profound drama of kids' games.

Like what to do so you don't get chosen, or do get chosen, and what works with which kids. How to become, you know, invisible. Or how to look like the very one that would be the very most fun to chase. And though the drama wasn't scripted, it was structured, and it was deep, and engaging, and sometimes brilliant.

AJP: Have you found grown-ups responsive to this approach?

DeKoven: Sadly, while endeavoring to teach the new curriculum to teachers, I discovered that adults are far more play deprived than children.

AJP: What obstacles have you faced when teaching about play?

DeKoven: The most consistent obstacles have been raised by people who are in need of justifying play—especially if the justification they are seeking accords to some criterion other than fun. Business people, for example, who are looking to play for a means of increasing productivity or reducing turnover or boosting creativity or generating new ideas. Teachers who see in play a vehicle for improving behavior or making kids want to study harder or exercise harder or lose weight. Then there are the people for whom play is all about winning and has nothing to do with playfulness. For them, if it has anything to do with fun, it's only because of the fun of being a winner. These people were also the most willing to pay me. I spent much of my early career running out of money.

AJP: Who were your best students?

DeKoven: My best students have been people who are somehow involved in an alternative something, alternative education, alternative organizations, alternative businesses, alternative life-styles, alternative arts, alternative games. These were also usually the people who didn't have the money to pay me to play.

AJP: How has your background in theater helped you learn about play and teach about it?

DeKoven: When I first studied improvisation, I found myself especially liking improvisation without an audience—just pretending, actually, with a group of talented fellow pretenders. I think this was my deepest learning experience—the power of shared imagination, community, playfulness, flexibility, responsiveness. I kept this closest to my heart, and it became the heart of my work. I remember one teacher who understood this deeply. Whenever she debriefed a scene, she only commented on things that we had done to further the fantasy. Never anything negative, ever. And she really appreciated us when we listened and responded to each other and played together,

allowing the scene to unfold as it needed to.

AJP: What is this aspect of play that you call the theater of games?

DeKoven: Every game is dramatic. You're playing tag and trying to run away from this really fast kid who is most definitely after you; and you're having fun trying to keep away from him, to dodge around things and people and terrain. And the closer he gets, the more intense the drama—sometimes for the people watching, always for the people playing. And then it turns out that there are different games. Tag is different from Duck-Duck-Goose. A big part of the drama is about choosing and getting chosen. About wanting to get chosen and not. This is a different drama from that of trying to tag someone or avoid getting tagged. This involves aspiration, figuring people out. There are so many different games around. When I finished my curriculum, I had collected more than a thousand. And each is different, each tells a different story, explores a different relationship between players. Games are like plays. There's a dramaturgy. There's humor and tragedy. They are models of social relationships, structures, cultures.

AJP: Did you find teaching and theater compatible?

DeKoven: Oh yes, in fact it worked both ways, for the students and the teacher. I challenged the kids to make up their own math, science, and language lessons, and they came up with entirely new numbering systems, new mathematical operations, their own measuring tools, and other delights. I learned as much from that playful exercise as they did; kids inspired me in turn. Studying for a master's degree in playwriting at Villanova University led me to write a play about kids and belief called *The Manner of Prayer of Daniel the Blessed*. I based it loosely on the kids in my classroom. I also worked as playwright-in-residence for the Theater Company of Philadelphia. I wrote and directed a choral poem called *Planetaria* that was performed at the planetarium at the Franklin Institute, and, for Philadelphia's bicentennial, I designed a performance- and game-filled event, a culmination for celebrations we billed as "Playday on the Parkway." (We played Giant Pick-Up Sticks, among other games, all along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.)

AJP: So, how did you begin teaching electronic games?

DeKoven: While I was working at The Games Preserve, I began writing for *Games* magazine; by 1978 I had published *The Well-Played Game*. Thanks largely to the efforts of teachers of game design—Tracy Fullerton at USC and Eric Zimmerman and Celia Pearce at NYU—the book has become something of a seminal resource for young computer-game designers. I

moved out to the country to start The Games Preserve, and between 1971 and 1981, ran it as a center for the study of play. By 1981 we had to close The Games Preserve. Priorities were changing in the culture, in general, and I was lucky enough to find a job in Silicon Valley with a video game company, Automated Simulations (later Epyx), which I became familiar with when I was writing for *Games Magazine*. My last encounter with the video games industry happened some fifteen years later when we moved to Southern California so I could work with the newly formed Mattel Media team. I had my own label there: Mind Toys. I also designed games for Children's Television Workshop.

AJP: What other ways do you put play to work or find play in work?

DeKoven: I tried to bring what I learned about the nature of the play community to other social settings. I developed a meeting facilitation technique, which at first I called "technography" but later "coworking." The method involved using a computer and projector to facilitate brainstorming, planning, and information gathering. I published two books about these techniques—*Power Meetings* and, later, *Connected Executives*. The use of the term "coworking" didn't evolve as I intended it, but it has come to describe coworking centers where people have, as a fact, managed to find ways to "work together as equals," which was the aim of my coworking concept.

AJP: Can you tell us more about the spirit of play? For instance, what's the difference between humor and comedy?

DeKoven: Humor is a survival skill. Comedy is entertainment. Fun is engagement. Funny makes you laugh. You can have fun climbing a mountain, but, for most of the time, there's nothing funny about it. But play keeps you from taking things, and yourself, too seriously. Because once you start taking things too seriously, you lose balance and you might literally fall off a mountain. In this sense, you can call play a survival skill. There are a lot of things that, taken too seriously, could very well result in your early demise. If you can make people laugh, though, if you can make the kid who wants to beat you up laugh, if you can make your sworn enemies laugh, if you can make yourself laugh, you endure.

AJP: How did you come to this credo?

DeKoven: It may be that being raised as a Jew—a minority—I somehow inherited the understanding that humor could be a way of sheltering myself from the effects of oppression, of anti-Semitism.

AJP: Is play anything more than defensive?

DeKoven: Surely it is, yes. Humor and playfulness helps you adapt to change. I mentioned earlier that my family moved around a lot, and humor helped me adapt to new places, make friends, and stay light. According to recent research I've read in the *American Journal of Play*, playfulness makes you attractive and even sexy; so it can even keep your marriage intact as you grow older and stupider together.

AJP: But you have said that as adults we generally hide from play, right?

DeKoven: Not so much from play, not exactly. I say we hide from *each other*. We play all right, but we don't let on. We don't even let on to ourselves. When I show people how playful they are, they are most often genuinely surprised. We play in private. In public, play is already a political thing.

AJP: Tell us some more about that, about play as politics—are you pointing to a dimension beyond interpersonal relations?

DeKoven: When you're playing in public—let's say in your front yard, or in the street, or in a park, or in the United Nations plaza—you're not just freeing yourself from worry about how you're being perceived, you're manifesting freedom. I learned this first from my participation in New Games Tournaments, those gentle, funny, and not-so-competitive competitions we designed to invite people of different ages, races, and cultures to play together. At the time when there were so many marches and protests and be-ins and sit-ins, the New Games Tournaments comprised a kind of play-in. We meant to manifest something close to the apotheosis of the democratic ideal.

AJP: Where does adult mistrust of play come from?

DeKoven: The problem with play, with the word *play*, is that it has so many different meanings. Some of them pejorative. Same is true of the word *game*. Recently, it's become popular to *play* or *game* the system, or *play* someone so as to fool them. This is why I think one of Patrick Bateson's real contributions was to identify *playful play* as its own kind of play. My kind.

AJP: Tell us more about your kind of play.

DeKoven: My kind of play is the kind of play that makes you laugh. Well, that makes me laugh with other people who are also laughing. I like to change rules, to play without rules, to make new rules. Me, I don't like telling jokes. I'm a situation comedy kind of guy. An improviser. To me, telling jokes feels kind of aggressive (which is why comedians talk about how they *killed* during their performance). My kind of play is very much like my kind of love. It involves a lot of hugging and holding and being surprised. Free

play, I guess you'd call it. A manifestation and celebration of our capacity to free each other from social restraints, fear, cultural differences, intellectual predilections, you name it.

AJP: Were we all experts at play early in life, and if so, why should we run from it?

DeKoven: We weren't experts. We had no choice. We had to play. It's a biological imperative for all playkind. Especially for the young. As we grow, we have other ways to learn and grow and engage. So we have to choose to play. And because of fears, many of which are well founded, it's risky, play is. Being seen to play is risky.

AJP: Is it mostly the shy and the bashful who worry about people seeing them play?

DeKoven: No. It's as if play becomes a kind of political act. There are times and spaces where you are supposed to play, or you are at least allowed to play, or sometimes expected, or even obliged. These times and spaces vary by culture. Some cultures celebrate carnivals, for example. Others settle for tailgate parties in a parking lot or in the stands during half time. But at other times, you're really not supposed to play—especially if you're not in a designated play area. When it's not the time or place, you need a certain courage, or unselfconsciousness, or sense of mission, or to be with other people who are as silly as you want to be. I don't think it is shyness or bashfulness (which might, in fact, at times be very appropriate and very socially sensitive) that keeps people from play, as much as it is sensitivity to others or to observance of the norms of appropriate behavior. This also depends a lot on the kind of playfulness you're asking them to exhibit.

AJP: So you need to be brave to play?

DeKoven: You need to be brave to play in public. Especially in a nondesignated area. Even more especially if you're playing playfully.

AJP: Is such play, play in a nondesignated area, a kind of mischief?

DeKoven: Mischief? Well yes in a way, sometimes. We seem to have the most fun in what Victor Turner, the British cultural anthropologist, identified as liminal spaces—the spaces between, like vacant lots, alleys, and streets. These places are not designated as official places to play, but we can claim them as spaces of our own, just like we can claim the games we play as our own and the communities we create while playing as our own. And, well, there is something to say about being naughty together—doing things that we're not so supposed to be doing in places where we're not actually supposed to be, if you know what I mean. But real mischief? Nah.

AJP: Can children teach adults to play?

DeKoven: We can and most certainly do learn from children. But I don't think they teach us to play. Rather, they invite us, provide us with the permission we seem to need.

AJP: How can we play as equals with kids?

DeKoven: Here, again, it's not so much about play as it is about playfulness. When we play playfully and improvisationally with children, we define the game together. It becomes ours, and, as such, we become equal players within it.

AJP: How do you improvise with children?

DeKoven: Here's one example: I was teaching kids improvisation. At this particular moment, I wanted them to focus on making things believable. So I invented a game that I called Toilet Paper Tug-of-War. The task was for two players to play tug-of-war, only, instead of a rope, they had to use a length of toilet paper, and they had to almost believe (I think this is called *half-belief*) that they were really playing tug-of-war and that they really didn't know who was going to win. This became a kind of metaphor for helping kids focus on maintaining a relationship when acting together. And it was good.

AJP: Why is it important to stay playful?

DeKoven: We never stop being playful. It's both amazing and reassuring to me every time I engage adults in playful, pointless games—like New Games—how immediately they seem to embrace, manifest, and revel in their playfulness. The important thing for adults is to allow themselves to be playful. Because playfulness, like humor, is a survival skill. It helps us adapt to change, to engage each other, to create community. Playfulness is flexibility, responsiveness, openness, sensitivity, awareness. It connects us to life.

AJP: Why should this be so hard to do?

DeKoven: In a word, fear. There are so many things we are afraid of, that we are told to be afraid of or about, so many impending crises to be taken seriously. And competitiveness, and the demands of adulthood, and the demand to be taken seriously, all press on us. But to play, we have to be able to set this all aside. To trust our playfulness and our abilities to respond intelligently and adequately to what needs our response.

AJP: Does it take a lot of effort to build this kind of trust?

DeKoven: The effort is not so much in building trust, the effort lies in not violating whatever trust has already been established. Trusting means you

need to be sensitive to that aspect of your relationship to kids and kids' relationships and our relationships to each other. Once you break that trust, you have to look for where the trust is. So you find something different, something understood, something demanding as little trust as possible—a game everybody knows and nobody really cares about, or, better, a new game, a game whose rules are more obvious, or more self-evident, or just stupid enough to make people laugh.

AJP: Can reticent adults play physically and do it as blissfully as children do?

DeKoven: Oh, yes, given the right game and space and privacy!

AJP: Is that the reason we turn play over to professionals, because we need privacy?

DeKoven: I'm thinking that the need for privacy is probably why we try to keep play *away* from most professionals. Professionals tend to have other agendas. For the most part, they are not focused on play as much as they are on performance. A few, though, a very few are both professional and unaffiliated (or accountable) enough to create an environment where children can lead each other in play (playworkers, for example, who facilitate play in adventure playgrounds).

AJP: Is watching play also play?

DeKoven: Spectating itself can be very playful. And even when spectating is highly regulated, as in a theater, there's intermission. And in the stands, people make waves and paint themselves blue and cheer or boo or both. But I think spectators change the experience of play for the players themselves. They play knowing they are being watched and judged. And so they are restrained from playful play, for the most part.

AJP: Can we make physical education playful?

DeKoven: We can't make anything playful. But we can make it more responsive to playfulness. If physical education is all about some drill sergeant ordering us around, threatening us with dire consequences and public shaming for our failure, then no. We can't make it playful. But if we allow the people we are educating the freedom to play, to choose their own level of challenge, to engage in the challenges they see fit to attempt, then, yes, they will become more fit, they will become more embodied, more joyful in the exercise of their skills. Go to an adventure playground and you'll see, maybe even experience playful physical education.

AJP: Can we make schooling more responsive to playfulness?

DeKoven: The same thing that I said about physical education is true of school-

ing. Anyhow, schooling is an awful word, unless you're a fish! Some of the best teachers are the most playful. They recognize playfulness in their students, encourage, and nurture it. I think the real question here is what prevents learning from being playful when playfulness is the way we learn just about everything.

AJP: Then what, beyond the current testing regime, prevents schooling from being playful?

DeKoven: Schooling is by definition not playful. It is focused on predictability—on performance, achievement, discipline, orderliness. Learning is something else. I think the very act of institutionalizing learning turns it, with few exceptions, into schooling. Giving grades, for God's sake, what a crazy thing. How do you grade someone's enjoyment, someone's delight in learning? Who is the real failure when a student doesn't learn?

AJP: You have spoken of playing fully? What do you mean by that?

DeKoven: Playing fully is to become totally engaged in play. Totally. Mentally, physically, socially, emotionally. Often, we play at playing. We kind of play. We dabble. We play as if we were not really playing. This again comes from fear, disenfranchisement, and disempowerment. So, there you are playing outfield again because everyone knows you can't catch or throw worth anything. So you don't play fully.

AJP: What's it like when would-be players "kind of" play?

DeKoven: I guess there are different kinds of "kind of" playing. Sometimes we are afraid to be seen playing, so we try to look like we're not having fun, or not enjoying ourselves, or we just try to look serious. The problem there is that we are such good actors that we wind up convincing ourselves. Then there's the kind of "kind of" playing where we play safe, withhold, and distance ourselves from the main action of the game where we might get hurt physically or emotionally. We let ourselves get tagged. We stay on the lowest rungs of the climbing structure.

AJP: If you practice at being playful, does it take the fun out of it? Can you try too hard to have fun?

DeKoven: Playing games is practicing playfulness. Playing playful games playfully is even better practice. Playing playfully is all about fun. That's how you know you're doing it right.

AJP: Is play ever not particularly playful?

DeKoven: Playing a violin, playing baseball, even playing a part in a play—none of these is particularly playful. Unless you are particularly gifted.

AJP: Gifted, or practiced?

DeKoven: That's the question. Let's go back a little. I like Bateson's term "playful play." He distinguishes the kind of play I teach (the playful kind) from the kind of play that is related to performing. Playful play is not about performance, it is about fun. It's not about being good enough, it's about letting go of any kind of judgment about your performance and the performance of the people you're playing playfully with, and just—well—playing. Comedians and improvisational actors are still performers and can't really afford to be playful (unless there isn't an audience) until they have mastered their craft so thoroughly that the quality of their performance is not an issue. When Linda Ronstadt talked about the fun she had in singing in productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operas or taking the stage with other great artists, I don't think she meant the same thing as being playful. Rather, she focused on performance and described reaching such a high level of competency that she sang *play-fully*, she sang without thinking about the notes or worrying about her ability to sing them perfectly. She just engaged, fully, in the music, with her audience.

AJP: You have likened play to dance; can you tell us more about this?

DeKoven: I'm talking here about playful play, and about playful dancing. Playful dancing is the way you dance when you aren't trying to be a good dancer, but rather trying to dance well with someone else, to dance deeply, intimately, responsively, improvisationally. It's the responsiveness, the connectedness. The same thing happens in almost any improvisational art—playing jazz, role playing, being funny together, being silly together. It's the together part I'm referring to.

AJP: What can animals teach us about play?

DeKoven: Like children, they can remind us, invite us, and provide us with an excuse. They can't teach us anything. But they can give us the opportunity.

AJP: How do pets create opportunity for play?

DeKoven: Your dog is almost constantly inviting you to play—throw the ball, he's saying, catch me! Grab the stick away from me! And when you engage with the dog, there's a sense of intimate connection, of communication and shared understanding, of being fully at play. Your cat is a little more subtle about it, and it's a little riskier than playing with a dog. In a way, the cat demands more of you, because if you don't play the way she wants you to, she'll either hurt you or walk away. So, again, when you play together, there's something intimate, personal, fragile, and sensitive. And then there's

the cuddle and the purring and the licking and all those exchanges of a kind of love play that's also sensitive, intimate, and personal.

AJP: You refer to the dog and his favorite toy, the stick. What makes a toy a great toy for humans?

DeKoven: When you say great toy, I think of a Frisbee. Then I think of the dog again. Then I think of a rubber ball—a Pinky, in fact. Then I think of a Frisbee once again. A toy like the Frisbee is great because it invites us to make up games with it. Because it moves so beautifully. Because it invites us to be beautiful with it.

AJP: Can you say what makes a video game great?

DeKoven: I've had lots of time to think about this question. I've had the opportunity, too, because while at The Games Preserve in the late 1970s, in addition to collecting street games, playground games, table games, and theater games, I began to amass a wonderful collection of electronic games. My collection of these games grew even larger when I started writing reviews; publishers were eager to put more games into my hands. The games I liked best were elegantly designed, well-crafted, and, most important, had rules that were simple enough so that they could be changed easily or as we said, "modded." In fact, this kind of flexibility in play had drawn me to folk games and street games in the first place. Creative rule breaking like this is a generous impulse characteristic of what I described in the *New Games Book* as the *play community*—where players adapt rules to allow more people to play more fully.

AJP: Could you give us some examples?

DeKoven: When the Atari game console first came out with games like *Tank* and *Pong*, these games were actually a collection of related games, where some significant variable was changed (wider paddle, more balls, reflecting walls, etc.). Because people were given different ways to play the same game, I felt that these games were a better invitation to create the kind of play communities that I had focused my career on nurturing.

AJP: You were lucky in finding the opportunity to make these kinds of games happen.

DeKoven: I was fortunate in several ways. First, I found a company where I could be a game designer, even though I didn't program. This was then, and remains, a precedent that only a few people have been fortunate enough to experience. And my wide repertoire of games was something that the majority of programmers lacked, so I could provide designers with ideas

that were innovative but based on tested play principles.

AJP: What kind of games did you design?

DeKoven: The first two games that I designed remain my favorites, *Ricochet* and *Alien Garden*. For me they were like writing poetry. We were very constrained by the technological capabilities of the day (I think both games had to be programmed using only 4K of memory, tiny by today's standards) but very free as there were so few established precedents. *Ricochet* was like a board game, only it was animated and could be played only on a computer. It also could be varied by the player and could be played against a variety of computer opponents. *Alien Garden* was a kind of art game, one that was beautiful to look at but required exploration to understand how to interact with the "flowers" in the garden.

AJP: Was it game design that got you involved with *Sesame Street*?

DeKoven: Yes, in fact. I based *Light Waves*, the first game I designed for the Children's Television Workshop, on a children's cat-and-mouse game called Streets and Alleys. The action featured Light Raiders—sprites—who appeared "sparkling, charging, and humming through the blackness on beams of light." I planned it as a one-button game so that children with limited dexterity could play with only one finger. Players had to keep two sprites separate as they moved along the rotating walls. The object was to get the good sprite to the goal on each screen without bumping into the bad sprite. Players could redesign the wall arrays to create an almost infinite variety of challenges. I also designed an abstract game called *Time Bound* for Children's Television Workshop where players try to rescue a time traveler. They learn a little history during the adventure, too.

AJP: What makes a game great?

DeKoven: Great games are as easy to learn as it is to learn what to do with a Frisbee. And they also may be as difficult to master.

AJP: What type of games did you like best?

DeKoven: I always liked the games that had so many variations that they obliged you to decide what rules you wanted to play by, or maybe invent—because this invites players to decide together how they want to play, to take ownership over the game, to focus more on each other than on winning. So if one way of playing isn't fun, some other way might be. Like playing ping pong without a net. Without a score. Seeing how long you can keep the ball going. Again, it becomes like a dance. Like making love.

AJP: Critics often charge that electronic games have alienated a whole genera-

tion, turning them inward. Do you believe this is so?

DeKoven: No, in fact I believe it's the opposite. When I was running The Games Preserve in Pennsylvania, I taught how a game can become a tool for creating community, for exploring the infinite reaches of playing playfully together. When Atari came out with a home version of *Pong*, it offered the game in a cartridge that had some fifty variations. So, I said to myself, this is promising, very, very promising. And then, once again, we were running out of money. So I took almost the very last of our money and flew to Atariland, thinking for sure they'd want to take advantage of my vast gamish expertise. Luckily, I found another small company that understood what I had to offer (even though I didn't know much more about programming than how to make a ball bounce in a few lines of BASIC), and the whole field was so new and so open that my kind of playfulness might have a chance to survive. Even more luckily, that company was run by someone I knew from my work at *Games* magazine, and he recognized what I had to offer. I designed some games I am still proud of. No, they weren't best sellers. But they were unique. And they were fun. And they invited exploration and creativity— key attributes of playfulness.

AJP: Do you still play electronic games?

DeKoven: I don't play many computer games now. In fact, I recently gave up my role writing reviews as Major Fun [DeKoven's persona as a drum major who wears a kilt—eds.], cutting myself off from an endless supply of board, table, and electronic and computer games because I came to the realization that it's not really so much about games, or, rather, that *I'm* really not so much about games, but about playfulness. I also came to the realization that the best influence I can have on games is achieved not by making my own but rather by recognizing, affirming, and encouraging playfulness in the people who are producing games—especially the indie game designers. It seems to me that the kind of expertise I have with folk games and street games and playground games is becoming less and less valued, available, or even recognized. So I've decided to drop almost all my involvement in electronic and even in commercial games to focus on offering a route toward playfulness, which seems to me to have become a depressingly scarce resource.

AJP: Can playfulness survive the drive to win? Can you still enjoy play even when you are losing?

DeKoven: Again, when you say *play* I'm thinking *playful play*—and I am end-

lessly thankful to Bateson for using that term. The more we want to win, the more we fear losing, the less playful we allow ourselves to be. So we don't get playful again until we get to the locker room or the "nineteenth hole." We can certainly play, and play hard, and play beautifully when we're under the pressure to win, to keep from losing. Much of what I wrote about in the *Well-Played Game* was about that—how skilled athletes can and often do transcend competitiveness. The professional basketball player Bill Russell documents that experience beautifully in his book *Second Wind*. But he's not talking about playing playfully. And I am, you betcha.

AJP: Is it possible to separate the stakes of a game from the game itself?

DeKoven: I'm not sure how to answer this question. It makes me think of poker. We can and do keep playing with the stakes, raising or lowering them depending on whom we're playing with. And for many a poker player, playing without something at stake just isn't poker. For me, as I say, again in the *Well-Played Game*, a lot of this is about the difference between playing to win versus having to win. If you have to win, there is no game.

AJP: What's the difference between a competitive game and a cooperative game?

DeKoven: All games are cooperative to this extent: all games are based on our agreement to abide by a series of made-up rules for made-up reasons. In expressly competitive games, winning is based on individual performance. In cooperative games, though, winning is based on collective performance.

AJP: What's good about cooperative games?

DeKoven: Cooperative games provide opportunities for manifesting and exercising playfulness and, in fact, for forming a playful community. In cooperative games, the player is more important than the game. The rules of the game, the goals, are constantly adjusted to optimize access to a shared community of play. I made shared community the goal for games like Human Microphone; Hug Tag; Samurai Thumbs; Duck, Duck, Elephant; and Mass Multiplier Crowdsourced Paddycake.

AJP: Tell us about the rules and principles of another cooperative game you mentioned earlier, the Toilet Paper Tug-of-War.

DeKoven: So, you have a length of toilet paper (say three feet). And you each hold on to an end. And you try to play the most convincing possible game of tug-of-war—that's the challenge, you know, not to play tug-of-war, because it's impossible, but to *look like* you're playing, *really* playing tug-of-war. So convincing that even you are surprised to discover who wins. Without tearing the toilet paper.

AJP: What do players learn from this game?

DeKoven: Players learn what they are ready to learn—maybe nothing more than how much fun it is to play such a stupid game or to pretend something so well that it seems real. As for me, I originally invented it when I still thought I was teaching kids how to do improvisational theater. Recently I played it with a group of people in marriage therapy, and for them, the connections between playing the game and the art of maintaining a loving relationship were vividly manifest.

AJP: Tell us about you musical game Kvetch Kakophony. Does tuneful kvetching do kvetchers any good?

DeKoven: There's a worldwide phenomenon called Complaints Choirs. Really. People get together in Juneau, Stockholm, Singapore, Cairo, Helsinki, and elsewhere and write about things they want to complain about and then set the complaints to beautiful music. And then they sing, beautifully, about runny eggs and taxes. But most of the people I play with are a little adverse to composing lyrics and singing in choruses. So I made it the rule that we wouldn't take the time to compose anything, we'd just let anybody sing anything they wanted, as badly as they needed to sing it, just as long as they were seriously kvetching. And if they couldn't sing in tune, or couldn't recognize what the tune was, so much the more to kvetch about. And it's fun. And it gets a lot of kvetching out. And it's part of our realities that we rarely get to really play together.

AJP: In your recent book, *A Playful Path*, you liken playfulness to spirituality and say that play is like a state of grace. Can play really be that profound?

DeKoven: The thing that catalyzed my writing the *Well-Played Game* was an experience I had playing ping pong. I wrote about it, too, in *A Playful Path*. Here's the excerpt:

> There we were, up in the barn, playing with our brand new, thoroughly researched, ultimate ping pong table. That barn was the center of what we were calling The Games Preserve. We wanted to fill it with not only every game on the planet but the very finest manifestation of each. And Bill chose that particular table, and those particular paddles and balls, and installed that particular kind of lighting for precisely that reason. It was not just a ping pong table. It was table tennis. Bill knew that I couldn't really play ping pong. And I knew that he could really, really play. And because

> we wanted to play together, we just more or less volleyed (he more, me less). After a while, Bill suggested that I just try to hold my paddle still enough so that he could get the ball to hit it. Apparently, that was more than challenge enough for him. And for me, every time the ball actually crossed the net, hit my paddle, and got back to Bill was sheer magic. After a while, we managed to get an actual volley going, Bill exercising the depth and fullness of his ping pongly skills, me magically holding my paddle where it needed to be. And after a longer while, we got a very, very long volley going. And during that volley, the ball seemed to take on its own, almost internal light, as if it were inhabited by our spirits, Bill's and mine, combined. And it was, for an instant, as if we were seeing God. Honest. When we left the barn, we were like two Buddhist monks having just achieved enlightenment.

AJP: Is it possible to play with profundity, spirituality, and religiosity?

DeKoven: I think, when it comes to profundity, spirituality and religiosity, playfulness is most definitely not only possible, but perhaps the only reasonable approach. In the Endless Blessings Game, which I also call The Competitive Blessing Game or perhaps the Out-blessing Game, the idea is to take turns trying to give each other a better blessing than the one before. So, if you say to me, "May you be a hero to your children," I might say "And may you be a hero, not only to your children, but to your spouse even." To which you might respond, "And may your heroism come as naturally to you as breathing." And so on and on, kind of like Toilet Paper Tug-of-War—the object being to make it appear that you are really competing, but all the time aware that the tissue of truth needs to be kept intact. (Tissue of truth—did I actually just say that?) So there's a loving sincerity to it. So these are real blessings. But not so real that you need to get embarrassed about them. But real enough so that you feel the blessings—so that you acknowledge the reality of them; and so that you experience yourself as someone who can bless people. And then everyone's a blessing.

AJP: One last question, could you wish for anything else in your long career in play?

DeKoven: Yes, I'll admit it. I wish I was the one who invented the Frisbee and the deck of cards!