



Finding Peace Between Conquest and Capitulation

Collaboration is the secret strategy to avoiding either conquest or capitulation.

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“The Western day is indeed nearing when the inner science of self-control will be found as necessary as the outer conquest of nature.” — **Paramahansa Yogananda**, Hindu monk

Today, a reporter asked me for an explanation of why people like to play games. I told her it was because we’re wired to feel personally affirmed when we find solutions. If the game is too simple, we don’t take it personally enough. If it’s too hard, we take it too personally.

Our brains are wired to play games. Much of who we take ourselves to be is an avatar, a constructed presentation. This is why computer games are as popular with adults as they are with children. As we grow older, our personality becomes more self contained and less defined by our success in competition, but it’s still a construction.

Notice that most older people are not attracted to computer games, or any games that establish a winner. Those older people who are attracted to competitive games seem to have more childish personalities. What they are is less mature adults.

Being less mature is not the same as being childish, because children are creative, while immature adults are avoidant. We can all recognize our place on this spectrum. Regaining creativity should always be a goal.

Growing Out of Games

Simple games have simple winners and losers. Preteens play computer games in which the main object is to kill each other. The entertainment is in deception and advantage. Children are punished for deception and denied advantage while, at the same time, subject to constant deception and disadvantage. For those reasons, these games feel satisfying to children.

Teenagers play collaborative games. They're still trying to kill the enemy, but now the enemy is abstract. The enemy represents some consensus that brings people together: good versus evil. As we grow older we become less secure, at least in Western culture. We become less creative, less confident, and more attached to security. We become less tolerant of losing.

The typical games that older people play are jigsaw, crossword, and sudoku puzzles. My father played solitaire. These are games that have no score and at which you cannot lose. The reward lies in finishing the game.

The Game of Life

Some people live competitive lives either because they are competitive people, or they live in a competitive environment. Competitive people are those who grew up being rewarded for winning. They have a competitive mindset either because they are athletes or hunters.

These people typically find themselves in a cage. Their inclinations are not tamed, they are directed or exploited. Like animals in a zoo, if these people are not continually rewarded, they become frustrated.

We call them "Alpha Males," regardless of their genders. People think this description is borrowed from the animal kingdom where social species are purported to establish dominance hierarchies. This misunderstanding belies our social dysfunction.

Humans are the only species who have this kind of Alpha Male mentality. In more balanced social species—which is all animals except higher primates like us—the hierarchy is fluid. In these more balanced species the Alpha is a leadership position, not a personality type.

In societies of canines and cats, weaker leaders abdicate to stronger leaders, they don't kill each other. Human Alpha's kill each other, often by whatever means possible. Donald Trump seems like a lesser evolved primate because he is.

Survival Versus Satisfaction

Some institutions elect their leaders while others have them fight to the professional death. In 1947 Winston Churchill said, “democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” It’s peaceful leadership transition that makes the difference.

It is amazing that it was only a generation ago that collaborative games were invented. There must have been collaborative games before then, but it was not until Klaus Tuber’s 1995 *Settlers of the Catan* that collaborative gaming became an established genre.

Brute force is simple, collaboration is complicated. *Settlers of the Catan* “is one of those games that's wildly addictive but also so absurdly complicated.” Tuber died in 2023 and his friends urged his supporters to “honor Klaus’ memory by being kind to one another, pursuing your creative passions fearlessly, and enjoying a game with your loved ones” (Ulaby 2023). They’re not talking about playing chess.



What is Your Role at Work?

Some of our professions are creative, like design, others are authoritarian, like the military, and others are predatory, like banking. It seems like there is no intelligence in this design. These organizations have just evolved without anyone’s intention. And it’s in the context of these unmediated institutions that we hear claims of conspiracy. After all, if there is disruption, then someone must be doing it, right?

Some structures are inherently unstable. They're unstable because they run out of resources, like the oil industry, or because they foster competition that kills off their leaders. Wherever there's murder, there's conspiracy.

Some industries require stability, like the military. These industries are collaborative and evolve gradually. Leadership turns over peacefully because the organization depends on an organized chain of command.

Other industries are competitive. That's basically all industries in a capitalist economy. These industries evolve through disruption and, occasionally, chaos. In this context, we have governments working to stabilize the money supply, while investment banks create unstable opportunities. The corporate structure of investment banks is also unstable. There are a few secure partners and everyone else is expendable.

What's Your Style?

I don't think murderous competition is natural. I think it's an evolutionary aberration, and that this is the message of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Yet we have many organizations, perhaps most organizations, where competition is entrenched or reoccurs with regularity. We also see this carrying over into our personal relationships.

As a counselor, I work with people who are trying to navigate a path between winning and losing. This can also be seen as the difference between conquest and capitulation. This is an unstable mindset, and you will find no peace at either extreme.

In some institutions, and in some relationships, there is no ethic of collaboration. When this occurs in an institution, we call it predatory or consuming. We see this echoed in social memes presented in such dramas as *The Hunger Games* and *Game of Thrones*. It's interesting that the word "game" appears in both titles.

We don't call other contests "the Russia versus Ukraine Game," or "The US Versus China Game", or "The Donald Trump Game," but perhaps we should. You might ask whether these are competitive or collaborative games. The answer is obvious.

If you work at a competitive job and live in a competitive world, then you might consider whether you will ever have any other option. I doubt you will. Part of the "reward" of competition is surviving, but I think that's a less highly evolved social structure. If you have gotten yourself into such a profession, I suggest the more evolved choice is to get out.

Individuals Are Like Institutions

If you are in a competitive relationship—and I am—things are worse. Getting out of it is much harder because your investment is extensive. You can't just clean out your desk and find a better job.

The problem lies in our expectations. We think we can win the game. We're looking for the winning strategy. There may be such a strategy, but satisfaction is never really on offer. Competitive games are games of survival.

If you want satisfaction, then play collaboratively. The difference between these two games is revealed by the old relationship chestnut, "Do you want to be happy or do you want to be right?"

Being happy is playing collaboratively. Being right is playing competitively. The reality lies in a combination of the two. There are adversaries, but they should not be your collaborators.

Collaboration is more highly evolved than competition. We can devolve from collaboration down to competition, but we cannot evolve from competition up to collaboration. It's built into the rules of the game. If you can't change the rules, then you can't change the game (Mastrangeli 2020; Stine 2019). Play creative games.

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