

Spirit of Co-operation in a Competitive Society

It takes a courageous person to stick out his or her neck and go against the grain of society. The Doukhobors did this in 1895 when they destroyed their weapons. The Doukhobors, *plakun trava*¹ of the day, chose co-operation instead of conflict as their predominant mode of human interaction when they first settled on the Canadian prairies in 1899. In a capitalistic individualistic environment, this was a courageous move. Jim Deacove (1939-) and his wife Ruth (1940-) have been courageous for three decades in their unique home games industry, Family Pastimes, which is based on the co-operative principle. Many banks, many suppliers, many friends and relatives warned Jim and his spouse Ruth Deacove that the business would never last with such an outlandish idea. 'Co-operative games? Are you serious? Do not, under any circumstances give up your day jobs', they cautioned.



Jim and Ruth Deacove of Family Pastimes.

Today, three decades later, the Family Pastimes company is solid, dependable, thriving and its developers are very pleased that their thousands of customers have helped to prove the naysayers wrong. Seven people are employed full time in a farm business, some of the games are licensed to companies in Brazil, Sweden, Germany, Israel, and Spain, and there are retailers in places such as United States (where 80% of the products are exported), Sweden, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. Recently interest has been generated in Japan, China, and Russia. The gross annual turnover is a bit over \$500,000.

These games are the inventions of Jim Deacove who was born on a farm near Kamsack, Saskatchewan to a Doukhobor father and a Polish mother. Jim has degrees in English, teaching and fine arts, and studied under noted painter Ivan Eyre. Jim first made a few co-op games for his own family² and was encouraged by friends to make more. According to the Pastimes catalogue:

'The Deacove family was and is no different from others. Sharing toys, helping mom and dad, being kind to others are values taught in all homes. To find games that help to reinforce such sharing attitudes, however, is very difficult. Thus Jim and Ruth felt they had to create some. The "hobby" became a small business in their home....

'Slow but steady growth in sales required moving the business into a cottage. With the addition of new games and greater interest by the public, a switch occurred. The family moved into the cottage and the business occupied the two stories of the old farmhouse near Perth, Ontario. The district was the Brooke Valley, which is jammed with artisans, authors and others who, like the Deacoves, moved back to the land in the 1970s. A new workshop was constructed in 1984 to replace the old barn and house destroyed in a terrible fire, October 1983.'

When the Canadian Museum of Civilization launched its Spirit Wrestlers Doukhobor Exhibit in the 1990s, Jim took up the challenge of producing a game to honour the centenary of the destruction of weapons by the Doukhobors. He sought inspiration from his grandparents who told him about the arms burning in Russia in 1895 and how the 7500 new Russian Doukhobor dissidents came to Canada in 1899 and co-operated in living, working, and singing together.

Ploughshares, as the game is called, addresses the issue of peace and war, with a search for a fresh alternative paradigm to our overfed military sacred cow. According to the game's instructions,

'It will be an adventure filled with danger and great rewards. To fulfil our task, we must be gentle as a dove and wise as a serpent. This is a game of collaboration, learning and discussion; a game full of exciting strategy, with each of us making an important contribution.'

Ploughshares was Jim's 70th game, a tribute to his ancestors from eastern Europe. He continues to revise, upgrade, and reprint earlier games as he gets feedback from his customers by mail and in workshops at schools.

Of the 224 games developed by Jim today, 115 have actually been produced. It is very expensive to produce a board game these days (\$10,000 to \$20,000), depending on how much colour and how many components

there are. As time and money permit, Jim develops new games, while his wife Ruth manages the business and the accounting. In the summer of 2002, for example, Jim has released five new games: (1) *Strategy - Diplomatic Mission*, (2) *Children's - There's a Growley in the Garden*, (3) *Hotel Ritz - Hotel Detective Game*, (4) *Break a Leg - Theatre Game*, and (5) *Seekers*, a philosophical, metaphysical game based on an old theme: No man is an island unto himself. Or as Krishnamurti said, 'You are the world'.

In preparing for one of his earlier workshops, Jim tells about the philosophy and practice of co-operation, teamwork and shared decision making - qualities that made possible the survival of his Doukhobor and Polish grandparents and those ancestors who came to Canada to build a new society - as well as bonding, support, and playfulness; openness, trust and safety; self worth and personal power; and well being.

Co-operative games: the beginning.³

I am always asked, 'How did you get started making co-operative games?' I answer by remembering out loud....

I am in our backyard on the porch watching the neighborhood kids playing some games. Like most families, Ruth and I have been teaching our two little girls such values as sharing their toys, helping Mom and Dad, being kind to pets. We have been discovering that more and more energy is needed to maintain these values in our home. As we sit and watch the children play, some very heady insights come to mind.

The 'kids' gather round and talk over what game they want to play next. They listen to each other's weaknesses, exploiting them for their own advantage. What I am witnessing is a change from consensus to confrontation.

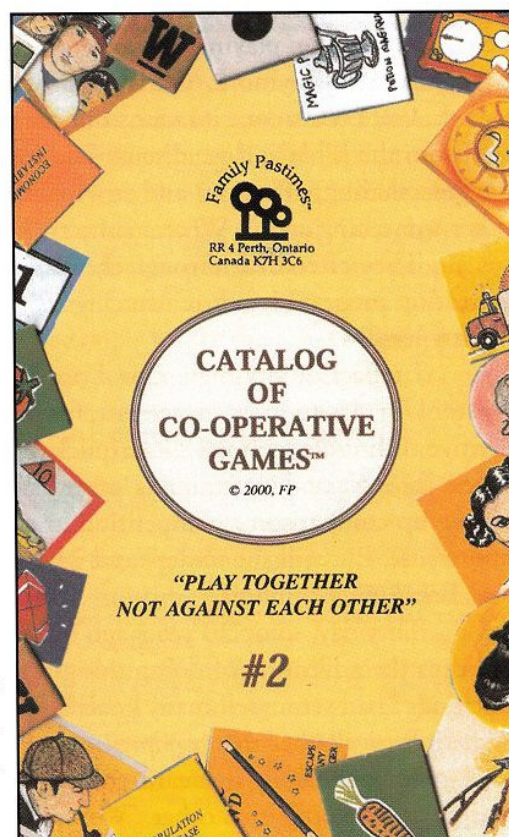
I began to wonder what would happen if the nature of their decision-making process were transferred into the game situation itself.

A little later when the kids are again deciding on a game, I shout out to them that I know a new game they might like to try. I make up the fine points as I talk to them. 'It's something like *Hide and Seek*, but I call it *Lost and Found*.' I go on to describe how I will start the game by covering my eyes at the Home Post and count to a hundred by fives. 'Everyone is to hide so no one else can see them. We will pretend that everyone is lost and I am coming to rescue you. When I find someone we join hands, rush back and both touch the post, which is the Rescue Station. Then the two of us will go out and each try to find someone and bring them back to the post. This goes on until we have just one person left to find. When this person is rescued, since he or she is the best at hiding, they get to start the next game.'

I finish counting to a hundred and wander out, keeping my eyes open. I find a little girl first. With great delight, big person and little person join hands and hippity-hop to the Rescue Station. Already I feel that something tremendous is about to burst open within me. I'm joyously discovering something here. The child looks at me, eyes free of fearing that this big person is going to wipe her out of the game. The delight on her face is teaching me a lesson that marks my soul deeply.

'I'm not very good at finding people', she confides shyly at the post. 'Can I come with you?' I agree to her suggestion. It's a friendly, flexible game, so we change the rules right there. Soon three of us are running to the post. Then I venture out alone again and the little girl and her friend go as a pair of rescuers.

The game is nearing an end, but we cannot find one nine-year-old boy. We gather at the post - an impressive search party - and compare theories. 'Have we looked by Riley's garage? Lots of good spots to hide there.' We devise other plans but don't find the boy. Then someone says, 'Hey, we've been looking everywhere but up.' We immediately spread out and look up. Sure enough, the rascal is up a tree and enjoying the spectacle of us scurry-



ing around. A big cheer goes up when we find him. We carry him on our shoulders to the post. He is given the honour of starting the next game.

Later, on the porch, I reflect further on the game we have just played. I know that this is a turning point in my life. I can't look back now.

The laughter of the kids; the collective good will. No one is eliminated from the game. Even the youngest is playing and making a contribution right to the end. The nature and quality of the relationships of the participants feels healthy, feels very right. No 'It' pitted against the rest of the group. What a name we assign to that person who does the chasing - 'It'!

I realize what has bothered me about the game we recently bought for our two girls. The game always puts them in conflict with each other. The point of the game is to beat one another and because the older one has the advantage of experience and coordination (among other things), she usually wins. The younger one either has to be coaxed to go on playing or, worse, she cheats in order to 'get even' with her big sister! Then the big sister doesn't want to play anymore. 'Christa always cheats!' is the complaint.

I reflect also on situations outside the family. I teach Sunday School in our local church. We have our lesson from the Bible and we discuss finding non-violent ways to solve problems. We explore the meaning of compassion, sharing, affection, and so on. Then I set up the recreation program and the kids pound and push each other something awful. What a contrast here!

They often drift through the class lesson listlessly, but have great vitality for the games. I now see how my recreation program is not reinforcing my lessons on living. Let's be honest: the recreation program is undermining my lessons.

I reflect on my high school teaching as well. Many more things come together. Competition is an effective tool for classroom management, for realizing various academic goals. This is the devilish attraction of the competitive technique: you get those quick, short-term results. To take the co-operative route which tries to nurture action through understanding is 'messy' and takes too much time. I can get my daughter to clean up her room by setting up comparison / competition images with her neat friend, Amanda. Tanya will clean up under that kind of pressure. But will she understand what cleanliness, punctuality, and so on are about if I continue doing that to her? I no longer think so.

That day, some 30 years ago on my back porch, shook up my perspectives for good. I challenged myself to begin the adventure of doing things differently in the family, the neighborhood, the church, and my school-teaching. I had set myself many goals in those areas of endeavor, but now I was challenging myself to realize them by *co-operative* rather than *competitive* means.

For our family it meant going to toy and game stores and asking the salespeople of games that stressed sharing and helping each other. 'We want a good family game.'

I remember well the first storeowner laughing aloud, then seeing that we weren't laughing with him, gave serious consideration to our request. Then *we* were flabbergasted. He couldn't find a solitary thing in the entire store.

We were forced to change the rules of many of the games we had at home - *Scrabble*, for example: instead of keeping individual scores we kept a family score. Just that simple rule change created subtle shifts in the dynamics of the game.

Some examples: we allowed free use the dictionary by all, and helping each other to spell words. Far from hiding behind our tokens, we not only exposed them, we even traded them. Finally, instead of using my cunning to maximize my own score with the treasured letters X, Q, Z, etc. burying them so no one else could use them, I now found I could still use these letters and at the same time create opportunities for others to use them.

I can honestly say that I feel a thousand times better using my mind to assist and share rather than as a weapon. Why? The reason is simple:

Our initial impulse to play a game is social - that is, we bring out a game because we want to do something together. So how ironic it is that in most games we spend all that energy and effort trying to bankrupt someone, destroy their armies, or in other words try to get rid of the very people we just invited over to play with us. If we can play a game that *develops*, rather than *defeats* that social impulse, then everyone feels better for it.

In addition to altering existing games, I began to cook up my own. The old cliché about 'necessity being the mother of invention' proved true in my case: since I could not find any co-operative games, so I simply began inventing them.

Once my mind began seeing the possibilities, I found myself creating original games for birthday parties and 'Play Days' at school, or co-op games as Christmas gifts, and it was not long before friends suggested that I start selling them. Ruth and I ran a few advertisements and were encouraged by the response. Slow, but steady growth in sales made us move the little business, which we called *Family Pastimes*, from our own living room into a 'prefab' cottage. We literally had a 'cottage industry'.

The several-hundred games I have invented over the years fall into roughly three categories: (1) Co-op type games and activities such as *Lost and Found*, which I have written up in several manuals; (2) 'Parlor'-types games in board, card and block format; and (3) Large wooden table-action games - the co-operative answers to Table Hockey, Soccer, etc.

What makes a co-operative game different? My working definition of a co-operative game is simple. I never have people being against people in any of my games. I have to make this clear because often I am asked at conferences and workshops whether I would not consider such and such a sport an example of co-operative effort. I acknowledge that a group may co-operate among its members, but often with the purpose of obliterating the opposing group. The goal cannot be separated from the means by which it is achieved. We can point out; by extension, even fighting a war requires a form of co-operation. The ultimate game for altogether too many people!

I have noticed some magazine reviews refer to various gangland crime games and certain adventure fantasy games as 'co-operative'. In each case, what the reviewer is describing is the opportunity the game offers for some players to combine efforts for a brief time in order to destroy another player, which is not my idea of a co-operative game. Very simply, in a co-operative game, people play together and not against each other.

To this day we still make a full range of co-operative games by hand in small quantities. We sell mostly by mail through a colored catalog as well as through a variety of stores. Also there are a growing number of people who willingly distribute our games from their homes and churches.

Initially, I hoped my idea would eventually be adopted by some of the big game companies (I was perfectly happy in my teaching position and had no intentions of becoming a full-time game inventor and manufacturer). I was keenly disappointed by repeated rejection from the giants of the game industry. My approach was extremely naive. I walked into company presidents' offices expecting to talk about the worthwhile game concepts I had developed and tested, but I quickly learned that they had other priorities. I became quite cynical about the brutally competitive toy and game industry when I saw that behind the facade of cute and cuddly stuff for kids were hard-nosed businessmen and businesswomen. Very few of them were cute or cuddly themselves. Hence my own introduction to the business of producing co-operative games.

I recall another workshop for a church group. I like the format - children are invited to join in. The adults are well educated and sophisticated. From chitchat beforehand I realize that they are also not convinced. It is a challenge to spend a couple of hours with people who are skeptical about co-op games. I decide to play a typical 'little kid's' game with them.

'Grown-ups, please be little children with me for the next while and begin to re-experience what a child feels in playing the games we offer them.'

The first game we play is the first game I ever remember playing myself as a child. My Grade One teacher introduced it to our class of children who came mainly from farming families. Since they lived far apart, the kids did not know each other and were apprehensive about starting school. The teacher attempted to 'socialize' us and help us feel at home by using games, one of which was *Musical Chairs*. Being a shy child and not tuned in to the cultural roles required to play the game successfully, I was bewildered by the rush and push for a chair when the music stopped. Eliminated early from the game, I felt puzzled and embarrassed when told that I was 'out' and had to take away a chair with me. Of course, the more we played, the better I got at elbowing my way to a chair. A prime example of quick cultural conditioning!

I wonder what would happen in the workshop now as we start playing the game. The game itself speaks louder than words ever could. One little boy in the group, four or five years old, is eager to play. The music stops: people push and take places, then look around to see who the first casualty is. Some adults audibly moan upon

seeing that the little boy is 'out'. He is crushed and flees to his mom's arms. After that some people are polite or do not try very hard, and are soon eliminated, but later confide that they feel uncomfortable being forced into an aggressive role of having to push others around. Children who drop out of the game early say much the same thing. Finally, we have a big group of spectators watching the last two participants go for the big win.

I knew that the adults could see how even though the game may begin as a socialization process, it quickly defeats this very objective as players get eliminated and must sit around watching.

I talk a bit about how I felt in Grade One when I was made to leave the game early. I tried to make plain to adults and children alike why the games I make up today are different.

Then I introduce *Co-operative Musical Chairs* and bring the players back again with the same furniture.

'People are now going to be more important than the chairs,' I announce, 'so the only rule-change is that after each round we take away a chair, but we keep all the people. It's up to the imagination of the group to figure out how to make a place for everyone.' I can still vividly see the laughter as the people hug each other, sit on each other's laps and succeed in all getting on one chair at the end. The little boy is on the shoulders of an adult. He is having a fine time.

The game uses the same hardware, the same music and the same people. But with the change in the structure of the game the roles the people play change too. People relax after a few rounds when they suddenly realize: 'Hey, I don't have to rush and push because I am guaranteed a spot.'

People afterwards remark on how good they felt using their strength to hug instead of to push. Children make the same observation over and over.

The workshop moves into a sampling of various table games. Groups of people gather round different games I have set out. *Harvest Time* is a board game for families with children aged 3 to 7 years of age. People enjoy being neighbours helping each other to bring in the harvest before winter comes - a very real-life situation. I look to real life for my game themes. Co-operative games are rooted in reality.

If *Harvest Time* were competitive, players would each be trying to get a garden harvested before anyone else. If an opponent were going too close to winning, others would have to send some disaster into that garden to slow him or her down. This is reality? Yet this is exactly how most competitive games are set up and ask us to behave accordingly.

I also set up *Housebuilders* for 5 to 8 years of age - a game inspired by my working with friends to build our home. *Mountaineering* (ages 7 to 12) is based on an experience I once had mountain climbing in the Rockies with several friends. We were tied to one another at times. The last kind of person we wanted or needed was some clown racing ahead trying to be 'King (or Queen) of the Mountain'.

Other co-operative board games which have proved popular include *Community* (9 to adult), where people work together to make a community or build a stable economy in their town, *Space Future* (10 to adult) whose players engage in the adventure of completing a common mission in space, and *Earth Game* (10 to adult) in which 'world leaders' develop strategies to solve the many problems on 'Spaceship Earth'.

Finally, the children go off after the play session to their study groups and the adults remain with me for a concluding Question and Answer Session.⁴ The questions are direct and challenging. Some are surprising to me, coming from a church group; I realize that I have brought with me some assumptions about adults who belong to churches.

Let me sum up this article. Games are used in various settings and for various reasons - socialization, entertainment, academic learning and character-building, to name a few. Whatever your objective, I invite you to try realizing it by co-operative means. Parents and teachers attempting to teach children to share, be kind to living things and to help others out are often troubled by games and recreation programs which undermine these values. Co-operative games provide the opportunity to experience sharing and caring behaviour. I believe we simply do not yet have enough such experiences.

Jim and Ruth Deacove continue to live in the artistic Brooke Valley near Perth, Ontario. Family Pastimes is still very much a family business, with neighbours hired as needed. In the early days of the business, the couple used paint rollers to glue game boards together, an old offset press and silk-screening equipment. Today they have a digital press and an assortment of machines that make their manufacturing process far more professional. A fork-lift truck is a recent addition that makes it easier to unload those big deliveries.

The Internet has helped them tremendously. It has allowed them to get materials from suppliers around the world (such as the 60,000 dice they use each year). It has given them the ability to find customers more easily, although they still rely on sending catalogues to those who request them.⁵ Internet services, such as 'Amazon.com' order in lots of 500 or 1000 copies of a game. And while Nintendo and computer games have reduced their sales, Hasbro began a massive advertising campaign to push the notion of family game nights - and this in turn resulted in a stimulus to Family Pastimes sales.

Another boost came in 2001 when famed designer Reiner Knizia, shocked the gaming fraternity with a new co-operative version of *Lords of the Rings*. Knizia did his homework and realized that a co-operative game is the only way to express them in a game⁶.

Still the notion of co-operation is a difficult sell in a 'dog-eat-dog' sea of competition. Jim realizes this, knows that his place is a small niche, but persists tilting at windmills as he has done for much of his life. He speaks Esperanto fluently, and once in a while helps others to make this a world's universal language. He once appeared before Keith Spicer's commission looking into language in Canada, but it was a different kind of bilingualism from what they were looking for.

1. *Plakun trava* is a botanical plant that flows against the current. It was used as a metaphor by the Doukhobors to characterize themselves as people who dare to challenge unpopular ideas such as conflict and the institution of wars.

2. The Deacove's have two daughters: Tanya, born in 1967, until recently lived in Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, working in a toy store as well as doing art therapy with street kids. She also studied piano and used that skill in teaching children. Christa, born in 1968, once owned a bookstore in West Vancouver, and in 1996 moved back to Perth with husband Hugh - and both are now closely connected with Family Pastimes industry today serving as Family Pastimes' directors. Christa bought the neighbourhood property and does administrative work for the company. Both Tanya and Christa were brought up in a co-operative atmosphere; they took their public school at home from their parents. The transition to high school went well with both children excelling in school. Tanya went on to take her Art and Art Therapies degrees, while Christa took a degree in business administration.

3. In shortened form, 'The Spirit of co-operation in a competitive society' by Jim Deacove first appeared in Tarasoff, 1998: 284-192.

4. *Ibid.*: 192-196.

5. If you want to receive a free illustrated catalogue of FAMILY PASTIMES co-operative games, send your request to: Family Pastimes, R.R.4, Perth, Ontario K7H 3C6 Canada. e-mail to: fp@superaje.com Website: www.familypastimes.com

6. Harvey Schachter, 'New Ways for Power Plays', in *Kingston Life*, Winter 21001/02: 38.