

Roland's Games

Our son Roland has always been ingenious in finding ways to occupy himself. Several of the ways he entertained himself and his friends are a favorite part of my memory of his young years. I'm sure there were others we never heard about.

In the winter after his third birthday, Roland and I were frequently in the car together. This was pre-child-restraint days; sometimes I wonder how both our boys survived the unprotected manner of their car travel. When we took trips, for instance, we leveled the back seat and put a crib mattress on top, giving them a wonderful, roomy play and nap space. Around town, however, they made themselves comfortable in whatever manner they wished. During that winter when Roland and I spent much time delivering George to various places for school or sports, Roland chose what was probably the safest way to travel without seat belts: he stood on the floor of the back seat, directly behind the driver - much of the time, me.

Shortly after the beginning of the new year, the new license plates began appearing on cars. (Motorists could put the tags on their cars from the beginning of the year; and they had to be in place by April fifteenth.) Roland was attracted to the new colors on cars and began almost immediately to count the new plates, each day continuing his count rather than beginning anew. I had been amused when George's teacher told a gathering of parents that one of the goals of the first grade was for the youngsters to be able to count to ten by Christmas.

Roland solved his lack of counting knowledge by asking what came after ten, then nineteen, and so on so that he could keep his record of new license plates. Soon he was asking me to help him remember his total of, say, 823, until the next day. By April 15 he had a total well over 5,000, which we thought showed a natural interest in numbers. I had spent the winter and spring with this oral counting going on just behind my left ear. All 5,000 of them!

His next game, which may have existed simultaneously with recording the license plates, was a solitary baseball game, accompanied by radio-type announcements of the progress of the game. He stood in one spot, tossing the ball up so that he could bat it. "Mantle hits the ball over the first baseman's head for a double, scoring Stirnweiss." The game and his announcements continued after that until the conclusion of nine innings. The Yankees always won.

One day Paul and I noticed an elliptical bald spot on the front lawn. We first suspected an outbreak of cut worms, a menace for Dallas lawns at that time, but quickly decided the bald spot was exactly where Ro's home plate was located. Paul suggested that Roland move his home base around. He did, and immediately caused other bald spots all around the yard. The dilemma of what to do next was solved by the arrival of fall and the opening of a wonderful pre-school for four-year-olds at the Science Museum.

However, Roland's fascination with baseball and, soon, football, continued, in a new, indoors form. I became aware of Roland and his friends, on rainy days, talking a lively game in the family room. I wasn't sure how the games were played, but we soon found out. Roland was sitting between Paul and me in church when we became aware that Roland was holding a heavy hymnal on his knees, opening it at various places and then closing the book with a bang. As the bangs continued, Paul asked him to discontinue the noise. On the way home after church, our little noise-maker told us that he was using the number of the hymn where the book happened to open for determining whether the batter had hit or struck out, how far a runner had progressed, or whether a fielder had caught the ball. Roland's statistician father was proud of Roland's ingenuity to generate random numbers in the absence of the spinner or dice that usually accompanied board games. And for simulating a baseball game much more varied, realistic, and stimulating than any of the board games available then.

Over the next two or three years, we knew that Roland was continuing to refine his imaginary but, to him and his friends, realistic games. We did not pay too much attention; there were no more disruptive noises in church. Early on, he had progressed in his education far enough that he could read and write. He now spent some time writing at length on school notebook paper, sometimes crumpling the page and beginning a new page. We learned he was trying to perfect instructions for playing his invented game. When one of his friends asked for a copy of the game, Roland told the boy that he might get it as a Christmas present if everything worked out. Immediately, he spent all his spare time at home writing. By Christmas he had spent his own money on collections of dice. He had laboriously completed several sets of descriptions of his game to which he added the dice, carefully gift-wrapping the completed game, and presenting some six or seven of them to his friends. He had substituted the dice as the generator of the random numbers and had worked out a complicated way of playing his imaginary game.

By the time he reached the third grade he had been reading sports books in the library, and only sports books. Miss Santarre, one of many dedicated teachers the boys had in grade school, tried to persuade Roland to read something besides sports books, without too much success. She spent time after school hiding all the sports-related books. In desperation for something to read, Roland tried other books, discovering at last the wonderful world of books. He remained a binge reader, devouring Charles Dickens and other authors. After Miss Santarre restored the sports books, he kept his reading material varied, although he never forgot his first love of sports. Today he is a bibliophile, still following sports but also many other subjects. You will not be surprised to learn that he majored in mathematics in college and went on to a Ph.D. He is now Professor of Mathematics at Roanoke College. On his website, he lists the Masters at Atlanta, Georgia, as one of his favorite courses.

[Editor's note: the Christmas present game was, in my memory, more like seventh grade than third. Chuck Lueckemeyer, the recipient of the basketball game, told me in 2005 that he still had it!]