Scoring in Games Assembly

This morning I would like to take the opportunity to reflect upon games, scoring systems and life strategies. Games are enormously important in almost every culture on earth. In fact, if I had to reflect on what characteristics distinguish human beings from other animals and define us as a species, I think that I would pick organised religion, complex language, the capacity for abstract thinking and – above all - the desire to play rule-based games. Our species is designated by scientists as Homo Sapiens – wise man – but that seems less accurate to me than Homo Ludens – games playing man.

And, arguably, no nation on earth is more committed to the spirit of games playing than our own. The British are not only fanatical players of games, we gave most of them to the world. It is difficult to think of one global sport that wasn't a product of this island.

Obviously we invented football, the world's most popular game. In 1848, Cambridge University undergraduates laid down the modern rules of the game. Then there is cricket, which has gradually evolved over 700 years to the sport we know today. The story goes that bored shepherds began to play it when tightly woven balls of sheep's wool were bowled and then struck with the shepherd's crook. Golf was invented in Scotland when the shepherd's crook was held the other way around and used to hit a stationary ball. We can add tennis and its indoor equivalent, table tennis, to the list of British inventions as well.

The independent schools of Victorian and Edwardian England established a sort of religion of fair play, team spirit and muscular Christianity. Perhaps as a consequence, public Schools created many other games: Harrow School contributed squash; William Webb-Ellis at Rugby School picked up the football and invented Rugby. Fives seems to have been invented at Warminster School, but is now associated most closely with Eton and Rugby.

Other games were invented by the aristocracy. The Duke of Beaufort gave us the modern game of Badminton, the Marquess of Queensbury the modern sport of boxing, and noblemen trapped in wet weekend parties at country houses took a look at the flat surfaces of the dining table and used it to create snooker. We could add many other sports to the list: mountaineering, darts, hockey, netball, curling, bowls and even baseball were all created on these islands. We certainly love our games.

And what a varied and intriguing list of games, which can be played by all. Compare and contrast them with, say, games invented in America, like American Football or Basketball. Those games, in requiring players to be unnaturally tall or physically huge, are distinguished only by the fact that you need to have a glandular problem to play them successfully. And, as we invented games, we did more than invent new ways to pass the time amusingly with a racquet, ball, or dart. We invented ways to keep score.

And how you keep score has a crucial effect on how you play the game, with possible implications for how you could successfully live your life, as I hope to show.

Let us begin by considering some of the simplest scoring systems. Probably the most basic is that used by basketball. Although the number of points garnered by throwing the ball through the hoop may vary, the scoring is a simple matter of addition. This has the merit of clarity, but the steady accumulation of points does not allow any subtlety. If one team pulls ahead, the other may find it very difficult to wear down the gap between the two scores.

Tennis, on the other hand, has a scoring system of immense subtlety and brilliance. Here I am not merely referring to the arcane use of such terms such as love, 15, 30, 40, deuce, etc. the point is a little more complex – the scoring system allows the game to be flexible and varied.

If one tennis player is significantly stronger than the other, the scoring system allows for a game to be won with four blows of the racquet. Four aces = game. However, if the two players are more evenly matched, then the requirement for a player to win by two clear points once deuce has been achieved can lead to an absorbing and extended battle. Thus tennis can accommodate both the savage execution of a weaker opponent and a subtle and extended play and interplay.

Further, once a player has won a set in tennis, the score is then reset to zero. Yes, one player is a set up, but the other player has the opportunity to regroup and is not disadvantaged in any way (other than by his or her level of skill) in winning the next set. In basketball there would be no such hope. By allowing a tennis match to be competed over three or five sets, the scoring system of the game allows and reflects the swings and reversals that can occur in any sporting contest, and in life itself. Already a game that requires a combination of skill, restraint and power, tennis achieves a greater lustre by a scoring system that is something close to brilliance.

Let us take another example. In shooting or archery, there is a very simple scoring system. The participants fire at the target. If they hit the very centre, they can score the maximum 10. If they are slightly out in their aim, then they will strike the next scoring circle out, and gain nine. And so forth. Very obvious; rather boring. This is a scoring system which makes very little strategic demand upon the players. Their approach is required to be simple: aim for the middle of the target. Compare and contrast this scoring system with that of darts. All the games involve the projection of an object at a target. However darts is a game of almost infinite subtlety and flexibility, simply as a consequence of its very different scoring system. Just as with shooting or archery, to score the maximum, the player must aim for and hit a specific section of the target. In darts this is the 20; ideally the treble 20. However, on either side of the 20 the 1 and the 5 lie in wait. The very best players are not inconvenienced in the slightest by that. However, most darts players are susceptible to a little inaccuracy. In going for the maximum possible score, one must risk the possibility of a crushingly low score.

A better strategy might be to aim for the 16. The highest score is unavailable, but if things go awry, then the worst-case scenario is much better than if you went for the 20.

This conundrum, posed by the scoring system in darts, raises significant questions for the life strategies that you might employ. There are plenty of people, some of whom have achieved success, who provide examples of the ‘aiming for the 20’ strategy. Their mottos are well known and stirring: ‘death or glory’, ‘all or nothing’; ‘live free or die’; ‘go big or go home’ - you can probably fill in many other examples. These are people who follow a high risk, high reward strategy in life. They back their own skill and aim for the very top. Of course, in doing so they must accept the associated risks. Some will succeed, and feel smug and proud of themselves; others, perhaps the majority, will not. Perhaps you are attracted to that approach to life.

Others will adopt a more cautious approach. They will aim for the 16.

It is not the best score that they could possibly have, but it will probably mean that they get a better outcome than those who adopted a riskier strategy and failed. It doesn't have quite the same heroic appeal as the first strategy, but it is a lot safer and will give you a greater chance of admittedly slightly less success. Is that a strategy you find yourself adopting?

You probably employ a mixture of approaches, depending on your confidence in any given situation. And this is just one example from one game. I'm willing to bet that the strategies you bring to bear in just about any sport or game are both reflective of your approach to life, and perhaps can serve as guides to your own decision-making. This is so much so that there is a whole branch of study called Game Theory: "the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers." Game theory is used in economics, political science, and psychology, as well as logic, computer science, biology and poker.

For the purposes of this assembly, I do not propose to dive into the complexities of game theory, but wish to use the two examples I gave to prompt some further questions. In tennis, we saw how the complexity introduced by the scoring system allowed for the uncertainties of life, with its ebb and flow of confidence and success, to be at the heart of the game. In darts, we saw how the scoring system requires each player to assess risk, working out the wisest strategy to ensure maximum success. Darts teaches us that no one can achieve maximal success without the attendant danger of losing it all; it reminds us that by settling for good rather than great, risks are reduced, although success is thereby limited.

Both prompt the question: 'How do we keep score in our own lives?' That's a tough one – 'How do we keep score in our own lives?' Money? Possessions? Status and power? That which cannot be lost due to the actions of others? Love? There are thousands of possible answers.

I can't answer that question for you. Only you can answer that question for yourself. And only you can devise the strategies you will employ to set about achieving it.

For very many years the question 'What is the meaning of life?' has been considered the essence of the unanswerable. However, I suppose it is just another way of asking how you keep score in your life. If we take it in that spirit, if we look at it as keeping score, the question 'What is the meaning of life?' could not be more simple. It becomes a question appropriate for Homo Ludens – the games playing man. Recast as a sort of game, whose rules are in our hands and whose scoring system can be shaped accordingly, we can answer the question quite easily. What is the meaning of life? Whatever you want it to be.