

Adults in the building came too, uninvited, laughing back when Wennefer asked them why they were gatecrashing the children's party.

After the first month of evening study sessions Wennefer suggested it was time we made a plan. "You waste time working with no plan," he said. Once he showed us how, it seemed a natural, easy way to do things. We decided we would spend an hour studying every evening.

"That leaves half an hour. What shall we do with that time?"

"We can read," Biko said.

"Or learn games," I said.

"We can do both," Wennefer said.

I think we learned as much playing ludo, oware, ananse, draughts and the many word and number games Wennefer taught us as we did in our regular study time. Watching him play ludo, I remember thinking, the first time, that this was an adult who didn't know how to play the simple game. He seemed to be doing everything possible to lose. I was flabbergasted when he won.

Biko was just as puzzled. The second night he went through the first hour of study time eagerly. He didn't rush through the work. Biko was always a careful worker, concentrating intensely. At times I supposed he got so far inside what he was doing that the world outside ceased to exist, temporarily, for him. He worked with such a head of energy that it was clear something beyond the work was pulling him. When the study hour was over he brought out the ludo board and counters so enthusiastically that Wennefer chuckled. His laughter infected me.

"Today you look ready to beat me, Biko," Wennefer said. "But you'll have to wait a while. It's Lindela's turn."

More than wanting to win, I was curious to see what would happen. The game the night before had ended so mysteriously. All through the game it had looked as if Wennefer were set to lose. Then in the last few minutes, at the very end, an entirely different picture emerged. I wanted to understand what had happened. I paid attention to the unfolding game as never before. That night I came to understand something new.

No doubt you know the game of ludo from your childhood. Players

start with four counters each. Throwing dice, they advance the counters according to their scores. The first player to get all counters home is the winner.

I had supposed, from the day I learned to play, that skilled players did their best to get each counter to complete the circuit of the game board as fast as possible. I had assumed that this meant protecting advancing counters by moving them ahead of approaching opponents as speedily as feasible. An opposing counter landing in your space displaced your counter, sending it all the way back to begin the circuit from base zero.

Wennefer's style of play the night before had been spectacularly contrary to this sensible approach. From the beginning he showed no interest in advancing his counters homeward, individually. He deployed them in a group, moving the last one always, as if he were waiting for faster advancing opponents to strike and send his counters back to begin the difficult circuit afresh.

My mood shifted from puzzlement to astonishment when I realized, watching him this night, that this was just what he was doing. He didn't want any of his counters to get home alone. He wanted them to advance together. He didn't mind starting over and over again, if necessary.

This process of starting over was necessary only for a time. Biko and I, seeking speed for our individual counters, had numerous delightful opportunities of knocking Wennefer's slow counters back. While we jubilated, he welcomed each setback with a sad little groan. By the end of the evening we had learned to recognize it as the sound of amused foreknowledge. Because we kept knocking back Wennefer's counters and pushing ours forward, Biko and I soon had two each of our counters home. Now Wennefer's strategy changed.

A ludo player can block opposing counters behind a barrier by getting two counters of the same color to occupy the same space. As long as the block remains in place, any other counter coming behind it gets stuck. Now a player has to move at least one counter at every throw of the dice, so a barrier made of only two remaining counters cannot stay locked. It must open up at the next throw, exposing the two counters to attack.

Biko and I, by systematically attacking Wennefer's counters every time we could, sending them back to the beginning while we advanced our leading counters speedily homeward, soon had only two counters each to take care of. Wennefer had all four of his.

Now it was easy enough to see the intelligence of his play strategy. He could set up road blocks. We could not. He set up roadblock after roadblock, using two counters, advancing the other two, setting up a new roadblock, then opening up the old roadblock to let the two rear counters catch up with the forward counters. If by chance we knocked back his rear counters, he brought them back up from the starting base, patiently, repeatedly, leaving us impotent behind the forward road block, knocking our counters out of his way, then moving his counters forward together at their own speed, at his utterly unhurried pleasure.

This was the last time Biko lost as he did the first day. Once he saw why Wennefer's strategy was the better one, he made it his own. So did I. We had the pleasure of hearing Wennefer's playful moan get deeper, until finally it turned into a rueful admission: "Now this is like just me playing against two of me."

We did not get tired of ludo. We moved on to new games, hardly noticing that in time the difference between our games and our studies was getting harder to tell. Wennefer knew many, many games. He seemed to get a quiet pleasure from teaching us so well that we ended up beating him. More amazing still, he had this way of turning learning into games. He taught us to make cards for learning new languages, all in the form of a game. That was how he started us learning Latin and Greek, pulling us through the strangeness of early learning by making it as exciting as play.

On an afternoon during the short December vacation, Wennefer took us to see a neighbor in his office at the Government Printing Department. Mr. Muganda was delighted that we'd come to see him at work. He was an Assistant Manager at the printing press, and he walked around his floor, pointing out what each of the machines did, and how it was right here in this office that many of the official documents, forms and receipt books the administration needed to function correctly were printed.