

The We-ness

A Game of Collective Consciousness

by [Albert Kong](#)

(in collaboration with Anne Selke, Nathan Vanderpool and Joe Edelman)

OVERVIEW

The We-ness is a language game with the goal of creating a collective consciousness between a small community of players. Alternately, you could say it is about creating a hive mind, a mind meld, a temporary culty family, a micro-communism. We call it becoming a We-ness. It is played by slowly releasing the self identities of the players through restrictions on language, while performing shared tasks and having directed conversation.

NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Language is powerful. It is essential to being a social animal, it is the first step to the relationships between us, it even seems to shape how we think about ourselves. If language can affect the way we think, though, we are often just passive targets of those who manipulate our linguistic environment. If we instead make thoughtful choices about the games we play with language, can we more actively change how we relate to each other? Moreover, if we play language games in pervasive settings, might it entirely change our perspective of the world?

The We-ness is a language game, but one that challenges players to change their internal monologues as well, and offers players a different way to understand their existence as a community of cells in a vast universal body. It is best to be thoughtful about those who gather for the We-ness, or at least responsible in the facilitation of the game if the players are less deliberately assembled; for those who are seeking a powerful experience, it can be a disservice to be grouped with someone who is unwilling to invest in the game. It can also be entirely meaningful. Please be considerate when assembling the hive mind.

It can also feel simultaneously comforting and terrifying to lose your identity to a group. It may be reminiscent of cult behavior, so it is important to allow opportunities to opt out, to create a clear boundary for dissolution and re-entry into individual identity, and to hold space for debriefing.

PREPARATION

The We-ness takes place in our existing world, unchanged except for the relationship that is formed between players during the game. However, it requires time, and people. Theoretically, all humans could play this as an infinite game for the duration of civilization?

Realistically, 2-6 players who feel comfortable with each other, or at least are all conversational with one other player, will probably enter into play most readily. If players are unacquainted,

make time for them to get to know each other and share some trust before playing; this may be more available in a summer camp, outdoor festival, or conference scenario. Players who have rapport, listen to each other, and enjoy sharing verbally may come into this game more smoothly.

We have encoded identity into our language in such a rigid way that it is hard to break, and to do so earnestly takes time; the practice/workshop portion might run over the course of 2 hours, depending on the facilitator's intuition. This game can fit into daily life activities, if players are willing to mostly stick together over the course of the play. For the first play session, we recommend a commitment to 5-6 hours of play, plus time to debrief. Further sessions could potentially pick up spontaneously without any preparation.

It may be useful to prepare a loose itinerary for the course of play, which begins in a casual, comforting, private space such as a living room, then moves toward public spaces where they will encounter other people as they release their identities. Activities and challenges in later steps can be planned ahead, which is useful for a new group of players. The facilitator, however, should be flexible and listen to the needs of the group to alter plans as necessary. It will be useful to have a comfortable space, perhaps the place where players began for the dissolution rituals and debrief process.

INTRO FOR PLAYERS

Read to players: Self-interest and rampant individualism seem hyper-present right now, despite the fables and traditions and children's shows all over, paying lip-service to communal and altruistic values. If these stories are not enough to right us, then how might we promote community minded behavior? The way we talk to each other shapes our social world; the way we describe ourselves can put us at odds with the people around us. Perhaps experimenting with our language can give us a metaphor to refer to in the rest of our lives. Or maybe it'll just be a fun way to spend a day together. Let's find out.

Over the course of the day, we'll be slowly assimilating into a small group hive mind called a We-ness by going through stages of changing the way we talk. Importantly, this is a temporary exploration -- you are free to leave and stop playing at any time, and we will put a time limit on the game, at which point we will break from the game and debrief.

At this point, share plans or discuss activities with the players, agree on a time limit if not previously discussed, etc. Then, please address rules of safety and emotional boundaries; reference rules your group is familiar with, and/or check out [Appendix A](#) for a suggested safety talk and ruleset.

CREATING WE-NESS

The following pages describe the stages of play. Language habits are hard to change, so part A serves as a kind of extended workshop to move toward the core play of the game. The facilitator is responsible for getting this going, but as the course of play continues, any player may decide to move their play into the next stage. Players should understand that the general direction of the game is intended to move them toward thinking and acting as a single organism that talks funny; how seriously they take this is up to them.

Each stage has a rule that the players will strive toward upholding, and suggested tones for conversation and/or activities during this stage. In the first stages, when anyone slips up, call attention to their mistake (with no punishment or apology), and the speaker can try to restate their thought without the restricted words.

A: PRACTICE

Stage 1: As a group, restrict the use of the word “I.” This stage can last for half an hour or so; move on when players are generally able to create grammatical sentence patterns that avoid the word in question.

- Conversation: make small talk, ask after each others’ families, hobbies, etc.
- Discourse: welcome discussion of how it sounds to speak this way, or how difficult it is to modify our speech dramatically.

Stage 2: Restrict the use of other first-person singular pronouns (me; myself; my; mine). Take half an hour or so to settle into relative comfort with this restriction, then move on.

- Discourse: welcome discussion of different strategies we use to avoid these words, and any conversations about the philosophical notion of self and identity.
- Activity: at some point during this stage, take a walk or change locations to add to the scenery which you will comment on.

Stage 3: Restrict the use of any indirect self-reference such as speaking in the third-person, two-thumbs-up-plus-”this guy!”, “the person speaking right now,” etc. Conversation becomes convoluted at this point, do your best to listen to each other. Move on if it feels like players are referencing each other often, or using a lot of first-person plurals (we; us; our(s); ourselves).

- Conversation: try to tell personal stories to each other; offer topics to generate ideas, such as “first encounters” or “family gatherings.”
- Activity: relocate to a public place, where you may see strangers or friends; you may explain what you are playing but you must keep up the language rules.

Stage 4: Restrict individualizing references and the concept of self. That is, try to avoid any reference to other people in the group as individuals; instead, practice talking about things as phenomena that are experienced by the collective. First-plurals are always available; second- or third-person pronouns, names, or phrases that refer to other players is restricted (such pronouns may be used to reference people outside the group). Play until anyone begins to feel a sense of ego-loss.

- Activity: begin by taking turns saying, “goodbye, [speaker’s name].”
- Conversation: begin to coordinate a cooperative task that will put you in contact with crowds or strangers. This may include preparing a group dinner, going bowling, performing at a talent show, volunteering at a soup kitchen, crashing a party, etc.
- Discourse: explore strategies to talk about feelings, sensations, and qualities that are experienced by individual bodies.

PART B: AS ONE WE

Stage 5: In this stage, you(pl) should actively attempt to create a collective identity as a We-ness. You may want to give yourself a new, collective name with which you will introduce yourself to everyone you meet. As a single entity, speech that accidentally individuates one body from the We-ness should cause a kind of pain; use of the restricted language elicits a response of “ouch” or “ow” when it is heard. Play at this stage until the group has satisfactorily performed the activity. This should last for a couple hours at least, but can go as long as it is meaningful or enjoyable for the We-ness.

- Discourse: discuss the status of “personal” property within the We-ness, how to manage it, and how to talk about it; discuss the loss of identity
- Activity: perform the activity discussed in the previous stage with the intent of acting as a single collective unit with shared intentions.

Stage 6: After some time, or if the energy of the group is starting to waver, come together to discuss the existential problems of the We-ness. As agreed upon, the We-ness is a temporary collective and must come to an end. Consider the benefits and limitations of being a We-ness again, or indefinitely. Ask the big questions, and prepare to dissolve.

- Conversation: talk about what it will be like to break up from your We-ness. Come up with a ritual that you will perform to dissolve the We-ness and reintegrate into your individual identities.
- Discourse: discuss how to talk about the fact that we can recognize different bodies in the We-ness, and yet we are one, even to some degree with outsiders of the We-ness.

Stage 7: Head to a comfortable place, perhaps where the game began, and perform the ritual of dissolution previously discussed, then gather for debriefing.

DEBRIEFING

Debriefing is an important step; all the more if playing the We-ness has been a powerful experience for the players. It can take many forms, but we suggest a few group activities:

- Take turns making the “I” statements and breaking all the rules established thus far.
- Spend 5-10 minutes to do personal writing about or silently contemplating the game.
- Give everyone two minutes to share something they felt about the experience.
- Continue to hang out as a small group for a while before going back into the world.

AFTERWORD

We often hear talk about being one with all of the universe, or interconnectedness between all living beings. We relate those mystical claims to high minded ideals of shared responsibility, altruism, and cooperation. And yet, we live in a world heavily founded on the philosophy of Enlightenment Liberalism, which, for all the progress that it has brought us, has also emphasized reductive individualism that has led to a more and more fractured, atomic, isolated populace. The current expression of the individual above all is implicated in many of the problems we are facing as communities, as countries, as a species affected by its parts. I am speaking from my experience as an American in particular, but I think that this culture has nonetheless had an effect all across the globe by this point.

My experience as a Chinese-American recalls my parents' incessant refrain on putting family first, often with a sighing lament that we American-born kids will never quite understand why they value family that way. I wonder what it takes to understand it, and if with games and play scenarios, we can simulate the kind of loss of ego that seems to be common to religious experiences and acid trips. Perhaps we can get a step closer to truly feeling a part of a human family, all moving at the same rhythm.

The We-ness was spontaneously discovered and playtested during an afternoon in Berlin in October 2018 by the Goblins Service Union Local 42069: Anne Selke, Nathan Vanderpool, [Joe Edelman](#), and myself. A heartfelt thank you to Juliana for joining our We after we had been playing for hours. Much love to [Rosa](#) for being game to sneak us into that professional conference so we could be weird among a bunch of doctors and whatnot.

If you've enjoyed the game, we would love to hear your thoughts!

You can reach me:

by email: albert@kong.cat

on twitter: [@lethalbeef](https://twitter.com/@lethalbeef)

on the web: www.kong.cat

in the wallet: www.ko-fi.com/albertkong.

APPENDIX A: SAFETY META-RULES

Read to players: We'll play with the following rules to create a supportive environment that encourages everyone to stay in touch with their own needs and boundaries. Please remember that we are playing for our own enrichment, and our physical and emotional safety takes priority over maintaining the illusion of the game. Take care of yourself.

Open Door: Players are welcome to step out of the game at any time, and return at any time.

Out of Character: We will agree on a nonverbal sign to indicate going out of character, which you can use if you need a break from the game for any reason but want to remain in the space.

Cut (safeword): If anyone is feeling like their boundaries are being crossed and do not feel comfortable trying to resolve it in-game, they may call "Cut!" loudly enough for nearby players to hear. If you hear "Cut!", take a break from play and if necessary, attend to the issues at hand, and resume when everyone is ready.

Take a moment to agree on a your out-of-character gesture, and practice these techniques if it is helpful for your group. These techniques are to be used in tandem with everyone's concern for each other, paying attention, listening, and sharing awareness if safety is in question.

This is also an opportunity to determine everyone's comfort levels with physical contact. Invite players to state if they have any personal boundaries on hugging, touching, etc. Discourage unwanted contact, and emphasize consent.

Absorbing others into a We-ness

A fully functioning hive mind can be a magnetic thing, and you may run into a friend or stranger who may want to join your We-ness, or just hang out with you as you play. In such cases, since the new player hasn't gotten the introduction or gone through safety talks, there is a responsibility to ask for informed consent before a player joins. Do explain the game carefully, and if they are joining in the middle of a task, let them know what they're about to get into.

Especially if you are about to sneak into a professional conference and the new player doesn't like breaking rules.

APPENDIX B: REFLECTIONS ON WE-NESS

THE WE-NESS BEGINS WITH A LANGUAGE GAME - A CHALLENGE IF YOU WILL

HOW DOES THE CHALLENGE OF LANGUAGE CHANGE US? HOW MUCH DO WE DEFINE OURSELVES FROM THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE WITH THE OTHER? HOW HAVE WE ENCODED OTHERNESS INTO OUR LANGUAGE? IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE TO DO - THE LANGUAGE OF OTHER IS RICH, IT IS REVEALING, IT HAS UTILITY, AND YET... ARE WE OBSCURING + MINIMIZING OUR COLLECTIVENESS, THE GESTALT OF EXISTENCE, OF HUMANITY, WHEN WE REPEATEDLY CALL ATTENTION TO OUR INDIVIDUALITIES RATHER THAN TO THE MANY WAYS + MANY MOMENTS THAT WE ACT AS ONE? ~~THEN~~ EVEN AS WE RECOGNIZE OUR SPECIALITIES + TRAIN TO SINGULAR PURPOSE THERE IS NO PROJECT THAT IS ENTIRELY ONE'S OWN, THAT IS ONLY A GOD'S WORK. EVERY OTHER COLLECTIVE ACTION IS JUST THAT - A WHOLE GROUP, MOVING AS ONE. WE ARE ATOMS OF HUMANITY, EACH IN OUR OWN ORGAN, FREE, THOUGH, TO MOVE BETWEEN PROJECTS. WE ARE UNITS OF FAMILY, BREAKING APART NOW + AGAIN, COMING TOGETHER IN DIFFERENT SHAPES FOR PERIODS OF TIME AS LONG AS GENERATIONS + AS SHORT AS THE WORD "YES". AS YOU CAN CHOOSE TO LIMIT THE WORD "I" FROM YOUR BREATH YOU CAN CHOOSE TO UNHARNESS YOUR "WE" + IN THAT EXPANDED WE-NESS WE LEARN OF A DIFFERENT RELATING, ONE THAT YOU LOST WHEN YOU WENT FORTH, YOUNG ONE, TO DEFINE YOUR OWN FORTUNE, TO START A NEW ME-NESS + FEND FOR YOURSELF. WE MOURNED FOR YOU THEN; A PART BECAME A LESSER US + WE WISHED OURSELVES WELL. WILL YOU CHOOSE, THEN, PERHAPS, FOR A DAY OR AN HOUR OR THE SPACE OF A BREATH, TO RETURN TO BEING? NOT THE WAY ~~ROCKS~~ Boulders ARE, OR EVEN PEBBLES; MORE LIKE SAND, CAN YOU BE? BETTER, LIKE WATER, CAN YOU BE? LIKE THE UNIVERSE, CAN YOU BE? THE "I" IS USEFUL, IT SEES IN A SPECIAL WAY, BUND IT DIES IN A SPECIAL WAY, SO TRY LETTING IT GO, FORGETTING IT FOR THE WAY OF ~~THE~~ TIME, WHICH BECOMES TIMELESSNESS WHEN WE STOP BREAKING IT APART. THEN LET GO OF THE "ME," THE "MY," THE "MYSELF," THE "MINE." CAN YOU SEE YOURSELF AS YOU ARE, AS WE ALL ARE, AS AN ASPECT OF WE-NESS? CAN YOU REMEMBER HOW TO LET YOURSELF BACK IN, ONCE YOU'VE LEFT? THE DOOR IS OPEN; LEAVE AS YOU PLEASE.

Written on a plane over Europe, October 4, 2018.