

## SUITS ON GAMES: SLIGHTLY RESTRICTED, SLIGHTLY REVISED

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In the first twenty-five years after its publication in 1978 Bernard Suits's *The Grasshopper*<sup>1</sup> became known as a classic in the smallish world of the philosophy of sport, composed largely of people in Faculties of Physical Education. But it made little impression in mainstream philosophy, or among those teaching in philosophy departments and working in core philosophical areas such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Aside from a few scattered admirers, in that larger world the book was mostly unknown.

This changed with *The Grasshopper*'s republication in 2005 and the enthusiastic endorsements that accompanied it from such well-known philosophers as Simon Blackburn, G.A. Cohen, and Shelly Kagan. In the ten years since there's been considerable philosophical discussion, in print and on blogs, of the book's most striking claims, some of it laudatory and some critical. This paper will reconsider these claims and, partly in light of recent debates, propose some slight restrictions of and revisions to them.

What philosophers have mostly discussed isn't *The Grasshopper*'s primary thesis, which is the evaluative one that playing games is intrinsically good and even constitutes the "ideal of existence," since it would be people's main activity in a utopia where all their instrumental needs are satisfied. The *Grasshopper* introduces this thesis at the start of the book and returns to defend it at the end. But the book's longer middle section gives a definition or analysis of what it is to play a game that the *Grasshopper* then uses in defending his evaluative thesis. Suits here mimics the structure of the Socratic dialogues of which *The Grasshopper* is a loving parody. They

typically start with a substantive question such as “Is Euthyphro acting piously in prosecuting his father?” or “Can virtue be taught?”. Socrates says that to address this question we must first answer the definitional question “What is piety” or “What is virtue?”, and the discussion then turns to that. *The Grasshopper* similarly first proposes an evaluative thesis and then switches to a question of definition in order to address it.

Despite its subservience to the evaluative thesis, *The Grasshopper*'s analysis of playing a game has been the main focus of the recent philosophical discussion. This is partly because it occupies the bulk of the book, and partly because of its intrinsic interest and ingenuity. But it's also because it challenges a long-standing philosophical orthodoxy. In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein gave the concept “game” as his central example of one that can't be given a classical analysis in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions but involves only a looser set of “family resemblances.” Listing board-games, card-games, ball-games, and more, he denied that there's “anything common to all”; there's instead just a series of “similarities, relationships, ... overlapping and criss-crossing,” so what makes game A resemble game B differs from what makes B resemble C, C resemble D, and so on.<sup>2</sup> This view of Wittgenstein's is still widely accepted, and in proposing a unified analysis of game-playing Suits directly challenges it. His doing so has caught the interest both of committed Wittgensteinians and of those who, like me, find Wittgensteinian anti-theory views glib and unpersuasive.

Suits's analysis of game-playing has three parts. First, in playing a game you aim at a goal that can be understood and achieved outside the game. Thus in golf you try to make it the case that a ball goes into a hole in the ground, and in mountain-climbing that you stand atop a mountain; Suits calls this the prelusory goal. Second, the game has rules, and what they do is

forbid the most efficient means to that goal. Thus in golf you may not pick the ball up in your hand, walk down the fairway, and drop it in the hole; you must advance it using clubs, play it where it lies, and so on. In mountain-climbing you may not take a helicopter to the summit. The third and final condition concerns your attitude. To be playing a game you must willingly accept the restrictions the rules impose because you want to engage in the activity of pursuing the goal in only the ways they allow, or have what Suits calls the lusory attitude. Thus a golfer doesn't wish he could drop the ball in the hole – he wants to get it there by golfing – and a mountain-climber will refuse a helicopter ride. In Suits's summary statement, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (p. 43).

To assess this analysis, we must first know what exactly Suits is doing in proposing it. One possibility is that he's giving the meaning of the English word "game" or of the phrase "play a game." But though that's one critic's interpretation,<sup>3</sup> it can't be correct. Suits includes in the class of games many activities that aren't standardly called games, such as mountain-climbing and the 100-meter sprint, and excludes ring-around-the-rosie, which in English is a game and is even one of Wittgenstein's examples. Moreover, in "The Fool on the Hill," published after *The Grasshopper* and included as Appendix One to the Broadview editions, Suits denies that it's either necessary or sufficient for something's being a game that it be called one, and chastises Wittgenstein for asking whether there's anything in common to all the things that are *called* games rather than to all the things that *are* games. It's games themselves, he says, that are our proper subject, and instead of describing our language as it now is we should try to make it "more exact" (p. 202). He therefore isn't defining the word "game," nor can he be analyzing the concept expressed by that word, since the concept has the same extension as the word, or applies

to the same things. He must be doing something different.

His critique of Wittgenstein's question seems to assume that there's a category of games independent of our language that we can explore as such. He recognizes the difficulty in this assumption and in "The Fool on the Hill" connects it to the paradox in Plato's *Meno*. But a clear version of this type of view is defended by Colin McGinn, for whom Suits's analysis of game-playing is a paradigm of conceptual analysis and therefore of philosophy more generally.

According to McGinn, what Suits's analysis does is uncover the real or metaphysical essence of the property of playing a game, just as scientists reveal the real essence of a natural-kind property such as being water or being gold when they tell us that water is H<sub>2</sub>O or that gold has the atomic number 79.<sup>4</sup> Just as scientific discoveries can change our minds about what has these properties, persuading us that fool's gold isn't gold but heavy water is water, so Suits's analysis can make us see that, despite our language, ring-around-the-rosie isn't a game but mountain-climbing is, because the one lacks the required essence while the other has it.

But I doubt whether a social-psychological property such as playing a game has a real essence in the way water does; natural-kind properties are a special kind of property, with distinctive features that don't generalize to other properties. I therefore prefer a different interpretation of Suits's project, at least as putting it in the best possible light.

On this interpretation he's analyzing a concept, though not the one expressed by the word "game." It's a new concept, which he thinks we should adopt instead of the one expressed by our current word because it's more useful or illuminating. Let me explain.

There are a great many concepts we could express in our language, some useful for understanding and managing in the world and some not. The concept of water is useful, and we

therefore have a separate word for it; so is the concept of the number three. But the concept of the set containing water, the number three, and the tip of my nose isn't useful and, not surprisingly, we don't have a separate word for it.

Most of our words are for useful concepts, but it would be naive to think they always express the most useful concepts possible; the development of the language was too arbitrary for that. There's therefore room for conceptual reform, for proposals that we replace the concept expressed by an existing word with a new one that will serve the same or similar purposes better.

I interpret Suits as making a proposal of this type, namely that we replace the concept expressed by our current word "game," with its current extension, with the one defined by his analysis. For this to be just a reform, the new concept must be reasonably close to the old one and apply to at least many of the same items. Suits accepts this requirement in "The Fool on the Hill" and it implicitly guides him in *The Grasshopper*, where he argues at length that his analysis fits most of the activities we call games and only a few that we don't. It follows that to assess the analysis we must address two questions: Is the concept it defines in fact more useful or illuminating than the one expressed by our current word "game"? And is it close enough to that concept that it concerns similar issues? Let me start with the first question.

Suits's concept is more useful, initially, just because it finds a common character in all the items it applies to. Imagine that we have one concept that applies to a largish set of items but finds nothing common to them all, and another that applies to ninety percent of those the first applies to plus a certain number of others but does find a common character. Here the second concept is more illuminating just because it gives a rationale for grouping the things in its extension together and separating them from all others: the group includes all and only those

things with the common character. Since the first concept doesn't give a similar rationale, we can always ask of it: why classify just these items together, rather than a slightly smaller or a slightly larger set? Surely a concept that explains why it groups things in the way it does is more useful than one that doesn't.

If there's no common character to the things called games, Suits's concept of game-playing has this first advantage over the concept expressed by the English word. And it has it even more over Wittgenstein's concept, which, as Suits argues, can give no explanation whatever of why we classify things as we do. Imagine two activities. In one two elderly men play chess in the park, each moving a small piece of wood a small distance every few minutes. In the other a burglar runs as fast as he can down a street with seven police officers in hot pursuit, all straining to catch up with him. Now consider the 100-meter final at the Olympics, with Usain Bolt in front and seven other sprinters trying to catch him. If we have only Wittgenstein's undifferentiated concept of resemblance – and he offers nothing more – which of the first two activities will we classify the 100-meters with? Surely it will be the police chase, the resemblances with which are more striking and obvious. But that's not what we do; we include the 100-meters in the class of sports and games, alongside the chess (p. 201). But then we can't be relying just on undifferentiated resemblances when we classify things as games. We must have some criteria in mind that tell us which resemblances are relevant and which are not, and these criteria then give the real content of the concept "game."

That Suits's concept finds a commonality where Wittgenstein doesn't is partly because it operates at a deeper or more abstract level. Wittgenstein notices only surface differences between games, for example that some use boards, some cards, and some balls. But Suits looks at more

structural properties of games, concerning their goals, their rules, and the relations between the two, where the same structural properties can be found in games that are superficially very different. This has been part of his analysis's great appeal to analytically-minded philosophers: that by looking below the surface properties of games it can find a surprising unity in activities that at first seem diverse.

His concept can also find this commonality because it is itself unified, with internal connections between its constituent parts. Though it's complex, it doesn't just add concept A to unrelated concept B to unrelated concept C, as the concept of the set of water, the number three, and the tip of my nose does. Instead its third part, the lusory attitude, refers internally to its second part, the rules, because it involves an attitude *to* the rules, namely one of accepting them. Its second part also refers internally to its first part, because the rules concern means *to* the prelusory goal, by forbidding some means. The three parts of the analysis are therefore nested, the first within the second and the second within the third, which gives it a unity and even beauty that's also made it attractive to non-Wittgensteinian philosophers.

Its finding a commonality also enables the analysis to explain other things about games. In particular, it underwrites *The Grasshopper's* defence of its evaluative thesis that game-playing is the "ideal of existence." In earlier writings I gave a particular interpretation of this defence, arguing that the analysis explains why skill in good or serious games, ones like golf and chess as against, say, rock, paper, scissors, is intrinsically good and worth admiring for its own sake. It's because the rules of these games make achieving their prelusory goal not only more difficult than it would otherwise be but also by absolute standards reasonably difficult, so succeeding at them is a significant challenge. And in doing this the analysis highlights a good that's been under-

appreciated in Western philosophy, namely that of achievement, or formulating a goal, especially a complex and difficult one, and realizing it in the world. In many instances of achievement, for example Nelson Mandela's in ending apartheid in South Africa, the goal that's achieved has great intrinsic value, much more than any value in the process of bringing it about. This can make the latter value harder to see. But in a game your goal is intrinsically trivial; there's no value in itself in a ball's being in a hole in the ground or in your standing atop a mountain. The value in these activities must therefore be entirely one of process not product, journey not destination, or of doing something difficult just as difficult, which is how I understand achievement.<sup>5</sup>

The unity of Suits's analysis contrasts starkly with the better-known views, at least outside philosophy, of Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* and of Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games*. Huizinga's concept of what he calls the "ludic" is of activity that has all the following properties: it's free, outside ordinary life, absorbing, profitless, governed by fixed rules, and associated with social groupings. Caillois's similar concept involves activity that's free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and accompanied by a sense of make-believe.<sup>6</sup> But analyses like these, which just list properties, again invite the question: why use or have a word for a concept with just these components? Why Huizinga's six properties rather than, say, just his first four or last three? And if there's an explanation why we should combine just those elements, isn't whatever gives it the real concept of a game?

Alongside its distinctive unity, Suits's analysis is very much an analytic philosopher's, because it tries to distinguish things other analyses mistakenly run together, such as, first, the concepts of game and play.

These are repeatedly conflated in the discussions of Huizinga and Caillois, which in their English translations switch back and forth between talk of game and talk of play, and combine the two in a single concept of the ludic, which involves both game and play.<sup>7</sup> Nor is this a translator's error, since in most European languages, including those Huizinga and Caillois wrote in, the words for the two have the same root, for example, *Spiel* and *spielen* in German and *jeu* and *jouer* in French. Someone writing in one of these languages can easily be led to blur the distinction between these concepts, as Huizinga and Caillois certainly do.

But Suits's analysis is only of game-playing, which he distinguishes sharply from play. I'll argue later that the two are more connected than he thinks, but initially he's surely right. Not all engagement in play involves playing a game; a kitten playing with a ball of wool or a child playing with his mashed potatoes isn't playing a game, because neither is following any rules. Nor is all game-playing play. As Suits strikingly says, it doesn't follow from the fact that you're playing a game that you're playing (pp. 155-56).

To play is at least in part to engage in an activity for its own sake, or, as Suits says, autotelically. But imagine a baseball player near the end of a long season with his team in last place, and who's hung over from last night's drinking and would rather be doing anything now than standing in the hot sun waiting for fly balls. If he nonetheless does that because it's what he's paid to do, he's playing baseball but he isn't playing; he's working.

Or consider what I call a pure professional golfer, who plays golf only as a means to money and has no interest in the game for itself. If he could make more money doing something else, he would. If he could cheat at golf, he'd also do that. But he knows the TV cameras are always on him and will catch anything untoward. If with that attitude he obeys all the rules of a

golf tournament, he's not engaged in play; he's working. But he is playing golf.

That Huizinga and Caillois conflate games and play is one reason why their combination-style analyses are so unsatisfactory. They put together properties relevant to play, such as Huizinga's freedom and profitlessness, with ones relevant to games, such as fixed rules, and the result is inevitably an account with no unity. That it separates games and play is vital for Suits's unified account.

There's another place where he draws important distinctions. Because Huizinga and Caillois don't take the ludic to involve any specific type of rule – their definitions speak only of rules in general – they include within it not just playing a game but also such activities as performing a religious ritual, mounting a theatrical production, conducting a legal trial, playing music, and even fighting a war if that's governed by rules of war.<sup>8</sup> But these activities, though a little like game-playing because they involve rules, are very unlike it because their rules are so different; surely someone conducting a Catholic mass, acting the part of Hamlet, or defending an accused murderer at trial isn't playing a game. In saying this I'm not relying on intuitions about the word "game"; language aside, these activities just seem different from game-playing. But Huizinga and Caillois, because they don't consider the possibility that there may be different kinds of rules, can't draw that distinction.

Suits, however, who takes game rules to have the distinctive function of forbidding more efficient means, *can* draw it. He once told me that Huizinga's book, and also Caillois's, is "stunning in its accomplishing the collapse of all of the important distinctions a careful study of play and games requires."<sup>9</sup> This criticism seems to me just. Not only do these writers conflate the very different concepts of play and game, they also assimilate games to other activities that,

though rule-governed, are governed by very different kinds of rule.

I've argued that the concept Suits analyzes is more useful than the one expressed by the English word "game," as well as than Wittgenstein's, Huizinga's, or Caillois's. But his concept will only be a reform of an existing one if it applies to most of the same things. This brings us to the second question about his analysis: whether it's sufficiently close to concept expressed by our English word.

This has been the primary focus of the recent discussions of Suits and the primary source of objections to him. Some objections claim that his analysis fails to include activities that are games and some that it includes activities that aren't games. I begin with the first issue.

In *The Grasshopper* Suits is concerned to show that his analysis fits most of the activities ordinarily called games. Thus immediately after denying that ring-around-the-rosie is a game, he gives an elaborate argument to show that role-playing games such as cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians *are* by his lights games. Despite this, one critic, Norman Geras, cites two such games as ones the analysis doesn't fit,<sup>10</sup> and there are indeed weaknesses in Suits's treatment of them.

He proposes that role-playing games are what he calls "open games," ones in which the prelusory goal isn't an end-state that brings the game to an end, such as a ball's going into a hole in the ground, but is just that the game continue; these games can therefore in principle go on forever. In a group playing cowboys and Indians each player tries to make a "move" that his fellow players can respond to with another move that their fellows can respond to with another move ... and so on. Their activity is, he says, like that of two people trying to hit a ping pong ball back and forth across the net as many times as possible. And the rule that makes their activity a

game is the one forbidding them to use a script – which would make continuation easier – and requiring them instead to improvise (pp. 140-50)..

This is a characteristically ingenious proposal, but it can't be completely right. If your goal in the ping pong game is just to keep the back-and-forth going, what you should do each time is give your partner the easiest possible ball to return, i.e. a soft one in the middle of the table. If cowboys and Indians were similar, each player should do whatever makes it easiest for play to continue. But that would result in very boring games. The ideal might be one where the cowboys and Indians follow each other around a large circle at the same speed, so neither ever catches the other – then the game could go on indefinitely.

But that's not how my boyhood friends and I played the game in the woods behind our neighbourhood. We wanted interesting things to happen. We wanted there to be creative sneakings-up and ambushings, and in particular wanted there to be dramatic dyings. When you were shot you didn't just die in whatever way would best enable the game to continue; you threw yourself about and gasped in an artistic way, uttering as you did some memorable last words. And we didn't do this just to make continuing the game more difficult. We were interested in the creative or aesthetic side of the game for its own sake and therefore weren't just playing an open game.

This observation needn't contradict Suits's general analysis of games. His writings tend to favour exclusive distinctions, so something must be either just a game or not a game at all. In a later paper rejecting a view assumed in *The Grasshopper*, he argues that judged sports such as platform diving and figure skating aren't games – they don't belong in the category – but instead are just performances, in particular aesthetic performances.<sup>11</sup> As critics have pointed out,

however, these sports have game-like elements.<sup>12</sup> Just as in the 100-meters you may not start 10 yards down the track from your competitors, so in diving you may not dive from a higher platform; you also may not have a jet pack on your back, to make your dive higher, or carry lead weights in your hands, to promote a vertical entry into the water. It's therefore plausible to see these sports as neither just games nor just performances but both at the same time, with some properties following from each general characteristic. And this duality is even reflected in the way they're judged, with, for example, separate marks for technical merit and artistic impression.

It's possible to see a similar duality in role-playing games, so cowboys and Indians is partly an open game, with the goal of continuation and a requirement to improvise, and partly an aesthetic exercise. This view involves a slight restriction of Suits's analysis, or a slight loss of overlap with the everyday concept, since it now fits only one side of these games, or some but not all their important properties. But it hardly constitutes a serious objection to the analysis, which still fits, either wholly or in part, a great number of the things called games.

Some, however, may reject a dual account of role-playing games and say Suits's analysis doesn't fit them at all. Thi Nguyen takes this line in his paper for this conference, arguing that the analysis applies only to what he calls "striving games," which include golf, mountain-climbing, chess, and many more, but not to "games of make-believe" such as cowboys and Indians, which are in an entirely different category.<sup>13</sup> This view involves a greater restriction of Suits's analysis, but I still don't think it's a decisive objection to it. It certainly doesn't vindicate Wittgenstein's view. His claim wasn't just that there's nothing in common to *all* the things called games, so eighty or ninety percent of them can share a common property so long as the remainder don't; he held that the resemblances linking them are almost infinitely varied. More specifically, he said

“board games, card games, ball-games, Olympic games” don’t share common properties. If Suits’s analysis fits all these activities, as an objection about role-playing games doesn’t deny, it does something Wittgenstein said is impossible. And it can still illuminate the activities it does fit in the ways described above, so it explains why it makes sense to classify them together and why excellence in them is worth pursuing. This seems to be Nguyen’s view. While denying that Suits’s analysis fits everything we call a game, he allows that it captures the essence of striving games and has the further merit of showing how they differ from ones of make-believe.

A second objection of this type says the analysis doesn’t fit games of chance such as roulette and bingo. But these games raise more complex issues that are best addressed after we consider another aspect of Suits’s analysis, its treatment of the relationship between games and play. Here I’ll argue that the analysis should be amended slightly, in particular to make the relationship between these two concepts closer. One result will be to allow new answers to objections that take the second line and say the analysis includes activities that aren’t games.

For Suits play involves choosing an activity for its own sake, or autotelically. But in “Words on Play,” which is Appendix Three in the third Broadview edition of *The Grasshopper*, he adds a further condition. He says play necessarily involves temporarily reallocating to autotelic activities resources, such as time or money, that you primarily use for instrumental ones (p. 225). That’s why in *The Grasshopper* he denies that any professional athlete, not just what I’ve called a pure professional, is engaged in play. Since the athlete is making money, he isn’t switching resources away from instrumental activity and is therefore only working. (Note again the exclusive distinction: an activity must be either just play or not play at all.)

Though this isn’t a major point, I don’t find this added condition plausible. Most

professional athletes aren't pure professionals. They don't play only for money but also love their games for themselves; thus many professional golfers say they love nothing more than being "in the hunt" in the late stages of a tournament. In this respect their attitude to their golfing is just like mine when I play for no money, and I don't see why we shouldn't say they're likewise playing. They're also in part working, but if they have two attitudes to their activity they can also be, at the same time, playing.

Suits's motivation for his added condition is that if play is equated just with autotelic activity, Aristotle's contemplating the Unmoved Mover and an aesthete's listening intently to Beethoven will count as play. I agree that these are unwelcome implications and that some further condition is needed, but am unsure what it should be. I'll therefore understand play just as autotelic activity; though not ultimately accurate, this will suffice for our purposes.<sup>14</sup>

My emendation starts from an ambiguity or at least unclarity in Suits's description of the lusory attitude. He says it involves accepting the restrictions the rules impose "so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur," but you can do this for different reasons or with different ultimate motives. This allows at least three different specifications of the lusory attitude, depending on which types of motive it allows.<sup>15</sup>

The first and most permissive specification places no restriction on your motive for accepting the rules – it can be whatever you like. A second and more restrictive one says you must accept the rules from a motive of play, that is, because you want to engage in the resulting activity for its own sake or autotelically. The third and most restrictive specification says you must want to engage in the activity for its own sake for the specific reason that it's more difficult, or, even more specifically, that its difficulty presents a challenge you want to meet.

The utopians in the last part of *The Grasshopper* have this last version of the lusory attitude, since the reason they make scientific discoveries and build houses the old-fashioned way rather than by pressing a button is that it's more of a challenge. So when Suits defends his evaluative thesis he assumes the most restrictive specification of the lusory attitude, and he does the same earlier in the book when he describes a game-player as valuing his activity because it "provide[s] him with an interesting challenge" (p. 33; also 34). Some commentators therefore take his general view of the lusory attitude to be the most restrictive one,<sup>16</sup> but in fact other things he says require the most permissive view. This view is implicit in his claim that professional athletes, who he thinks are only working, are nonetheless playing a game, and it's also needed if he's to hold, as he surely must, that the pure professional golfer is playing golf. A pure professional has no autotelic or play motive whatever; if he's nonetheless playing golf he must have the lusory attitude, and that attitude must therefore be specified permissively.

But the permissive specification opens Suits's analysis to a series of damaging counterexamples of the second type. These examples haven't, surprisingly, figured much in the recent literature, but let me give three.

You're driving in a 60km/hour zone, and though you could get home more quickly and just as safely by driving 70, you stick to the limit because you don't want to get a speeding ticket.<sup>17</sup> Here you accept a rule forbidding more efficient means, and though you do so only as a means to not getting caught speeding, the pure professional golfer obeys the rules of golf only as a means to not getting caught cheating. If he's playing a game, why aren't you?

In *The Merchant of Venice* the suitors for Portia's hand have to try to choose the casket containing her portrait from among three, one gold, one silver, and one lead. In making their

choice they accept a rule that forbids the easiest way of doing so, which is to open the caskets first, and they do so because they want to engage in the mandated activity of choosing a casket blindly. Yet surely they aren't playing a game.

Finally, I once asked Suits whether writing an exam, for example a university physics exam, is a game. He replied that it is, and it certainly fits his analysis. You have the goal of giving correct answers to the exam questions and accept rules forbidding more efficient ways of doing so, such as looking the answers up in a book or cribbing from the person beside you. But exam-writing seems not to belong in the same category as golf and chess.<sup>18</sup>

These counterexamples all turn on Suits's permissive specification of the lusory attitude, which allows any motive whatever for accepting the rules. They can therefore be avoided if we adopt a more restrictive view such as the third. It denies that the examples involve game-playing because your motive for not driving over 60, not opening the caskets first, or not looking up the answers isn't that you want to do something difficult for its own sake; it's something different.

But the more restrictive specifications don't yield other results we need, such as, most importantly, that the pure professional golfer is playing golf. We seem to be at an impasse.

I don't think this impasse can be escaped within Suits's framework, which makes whether you're playing a game depend just on *your* attitude. His framework needs to be amended to include what can be called sociological considerations, about *other people's* attitudes. More specifically, his simple lusory-attitude condition needs to be replaced by something like the following disjunctive one.

It says that for you to be playing a game it must be the case *either* that you accept the restrictions the rules impose because you want to engage in a more difficult activity because it's

more difficult *or* that, though you don't have this attitude, most other people in your community who engage in the activity, or do what you're now doing, accept the restrictions because they want to do something more difficult. Sometimes *your* having a restrictive version of the lusory attitude makes your activity a game; sometimes *other people's* having that attitude does so even though your motivation is different.

I said only that we need something like this condition, because variants on it are possible. Its second clause refers to people in "your community," but there can be debates about what exactly that community is, or how large it should be. For an aboriginal Canadian, for example, is it just his aboriginal community or all Canadians? Similar issues arise about "your activity." If this is read narrowly, so only a few people count as doing what you're doing, the condition can have one implication; if it's read more broadly, to include a greater number of activities, it can have another. Finally, the clause speaks only of others who engage in your activity, but it could also or instead consider those who first invented the rules governing the activity, and presumably did so from some motive, or those who now enforce the rules. But we can set these issues of detail aside and look at the general impact of a disjunctive condition like the one above.

This condition implies, first, that the hungover baseball player and pure professional golfer are playing games. Though they don't themselves have the required lusory attitude, most other people who play baseball and golf do, and those people's attitudes make the activities games even for professionals who play entirely from instrumental motives.

But the condition doesn't imply that the counterexamples involve games, because it's not the case the most people who obey the speed limit do so in order to get home in a more challenging way, or that most Venetians chose caskets without opening them first because that's

more difficult – no Venetians chose caskets. But imagine that Portia’s father required her suitors to have a chess tournament, with the winner gaining her hand. Then, even if they had the same motive for participating in the tournament as in the casket-choosing, they would be playing games of chess. Nor, finally, does the disjunctive condition imply that someone writing a physics exam is playing a game, because most exam-takers don’t do that for fun. But consider the very similar activity of Trivial Pursuit, where you likewise try to give correct answers while avoiding more efficient means such as looking them up. The disjunctive condition implies, rightly, that Trivial Pursuit is a game, because most people do it for fun, and it implies that it’s a game even for those, if there are any, who play it only for money or, in another *Merchant of Venice* variant, in a tournament to win Portia’s hand.

This, then, is my emendation to Suits’s analysis: to let the attitude that can make an activity of yours a game be not only your attitude but also that of other people who engage in the activity. This in effect says that though *you* needn’t be engaged in play for your activity to be a game, others who do it must be engaged in play, so to that extent the concepts of game and play are connected. It remains true that there’s play that isn’t a game and game-playing that isn’t play, but for your activity to be a game at least someone must do it from a play motive.

It may be objected that this emendation destroys some of the unity I said was a key virtue of Suits’s analysis, since instead of his simple lusory-attitude we now have a more complex disjunctive one.

But, first, I think the amended condition reflects an ambiguity already present in our concept of game. In some cases, for example when you make a game of eating your mashed potatoes, that you’re playing a game depends only on facts about you. It’s not as if, independently

of you and your attitudes, there's a social institution of the mashed-potatoes game. But in other cases there is an independent institution. Thus golf, baseball, and chess *are* games in a more impersonal or sociological sense, so if you follow their rules you're playing a game whatever your specific motive for doing so. The two parts of the condition mirror this ambiguity between a more individual and a more institutional sense of "game."

Second, it's not as if the loss of unity is that great. In both parts of the disjunction, the one about you and the one about other people, what's required for an activity to be a game is an attitude, more specifically, a restrictive version of Suits's lusory attitude. So in both parts the same Suitsian elements do the analytical work: in both there's a goal, rules restricting the means to that goal, and a required attitude to the rules.

Moreover, the elements in the two parts have to be the same. Some writers who emphasize the institutional side of the concept "game" say it's a mistake to see it as involving any mental state or "mode of experience"; games are defined just by their constitutive rules. And some such writers include Suits among those making this mistake.<sup>19</sup> But the "mode of experience" phrase doesn't fit his lusory attitude, which involves only a preference for less efficient means but no specific experience or emotion. More importantly, a reference to an attitude is needed even at the institutional level. Compare again Trivial Pursuit with a university physics exam. They have very similar rules yet one is, institutionally, a game while the other is not. Why? I'd say it's because most people play Trivial Pursuit for its own sake and because they like the challenge whereas that's not true of physics exams.

The emendation also helps answer a number of other proposed counterexamples of the second type to Suits's analysis, ones that likewise say it includes activities that aren't games.

Some of these examples involve activities in which pursuit of a goal is constrained by moral rules. Consider someone participating in a system of legal punishment that tries to deter crime but disallows means such as punishing the innocent, or a soldier trying to win a war but obeying a rule that forbids targeting noncombatants. Their activities are included in Huizinga's and Caillois's concepts of the ludic, but they also, the objection says, fit Suits's analysis. Yet surely neither of them is a game.<sup>20</sup>

These counterexamples are initially puzzling, since Suits explicitly distinguishes accepting the rules of a game from accepting a moral rule. In the first case you accept a prohibition only in order to make the activity governed by it possible, whereas in the second you do so for an independent or external reason, namely that apart from this activity what the rule forbids is wrong (pp. 32-33). A consequence is that while game prohibitions are accepted only within the context of the game, moral ones are applied across the board. A high jumper doesn't put six-foot obstacles in his path whenever he wants to get somewhere; he does it only when he's high-jumping. But a judge or soldier who thinks it's morally wrong to harm someone who hasn't made himself liable to be harmed, by being guilty of an offence or by being an enemy combatant, avoids causing such harm not only inside legal proceedings or wars but outside them as well.

The objectors take account of this distinction. Kieran Setiya says a legal system has many arbitrary rules, such as that a defence lawyer may challenge only so many potential jurors. Someone who accepts this kind of rule does so to make an activity possible but can't believe there's a moral duty to make only that number of challenges. John Tasioulas asks us to imagine someone who doesn't believe it's wrong to kill noncombatants but wants a career as a soldier, sees that the rule forbidding such killing is part of the soldier's role, and accepts the rule just in

order to be able to occupy that role. Surely he's not playing a game.

It may be possible to avoid these counterexamples within Suits's framework. Thus it may be that, though there's no moral requirement to allow this specific number of juror challenges, there's a moral requirement to allow some maximum number, and a lawyer who adheres to the existing maximum is obeying that more general requirement. But another answer comes from my emendation. In the legal case, it's neither the case that an individual acting within the system accepts the rules because he wants to do something more difficult because it's more difficult, nor that the rules were put in place or are mostly accepted for that reason. Likewise, in the military case Tasioulas's soldier doesn't accept the rule against killing noncombatants in order to make winning the war more challenging, nor is the rule in place for that reason; it was imposed, and is by most soldiers accepted, for moral reasons.

A further set of counterexamples involve a sequence of acts leading to a final act, where a rule or understanding makes the sequence longer or more complex than it would otherwise be. One example is going home by taking a stroll around the lake while refusing the more efficient means of a ride on an ice-cream truck.<sup>21</sup> A second is a religious ritual, which is governed by complex rules that people accept just in order to make performing the ritual possible. (Rituals are counted as ludic by Huizinga and Caillois but surely aren't games).<sup>22</sup> A third is reading a novel – or watching a film or TV series – where you don't discover the final outcome of the plot in the most efficient way, by looking at the last pages first, but instead read the novel from beginning to end. Here too you accept a restriction on means but aren't playing a game.<sup>23</sup>

Suits's framework allows several responses to these examples. One is to deny that they involve an end or prelusory goal of the required kind. Consider a religious ritual in which you say

a prayer, cross yourself, and then light a candle. Lighting the candle is the end of the activity in the sense that it comes last, but it's not an end or purpose in the same way that getting the ball in the hole is for a golfer. When the golfer completes a golf hole, we can say he got the ball into the hole by driving it in the fairway, hitting his approach shot to the green, and so on. But in the ritual you don't light the candle by saying the prayer and crossing yourself; though these acts come earlier than the lighting, they aren't subordinate means to it in the same way as the golfer's acts are subordinate to his end. They're instead independent and equally important parts of the sequence. (Is the goal of the ritual then the whole sequence? If so, its rules don't forbid more efficient means.) Something similar is true of the stroller. Arriving home is the final act of his stroll, and it's a convenient final act because it allows him to immediately change clothes, get a snack, and so on. But from a purely strolling point of view, it would be just as good if he ended his walk somewhere else and was instantaneously teleported back home. In a stroll considered just as a stroll, the last step doesn't have the priority over other steps that a genuine prelusory goal has. It's just one step among many.

Suits makes a point like this about novel-reading. In a paper he published in a literature journal in 1985 he argues that reading an Agatha Christie-style detective novel can involve playing a game. You want to find out who committed the murder but, avoiding the easy means of reading the last pages first, try to deduce it using only clues available to you earlier. But he adds that not all readers of detective novels play this game. Some make no effort to work out who did it but just read on, either from curiosity or because they want to be surprised by the ending. (In this last case deducing who did it earlier would defeat their purpose.)<sup>24</sup> He seems here to be denying that these readers have the prelusory goal of the detective-novel game, because they

don't actively seek it. And he would presumably say the same about readers of a standard novel like *Anna Karenina*. Since they too don't actively try to figure out the ending in advance, they too aren't playing a game.

As stated, this point of Suits's is too quick. Though the merely curious reader of a detective novel isn't trying to discover its ending in one way, by deducing it from earlier clues, she is trying to discover it in another, by reading from beginning to end. But his point still seems to me to have merit. For a standard novel reader the last turn of the plot doesn't have the same primacy for her that his ball's going into the hole has for a golfer. It again wouldn't be the most accurate description of her activity to say she's finding out how Anna ends up by reading Chapter One, then Chapter Two, and so on. That slights her intrinsic interest in those earlier chapters and in the sequence as a whole. Reading a novel therefore seems closer in its structure to a stroll or a religious ritual, where the last act doesn't have primacy over those that precede it but is just one act among others.

A different response to these examples denies that their rules forbid more efficient means. Suits takes this line about strolls in *The Grasshopper* under the heading "Taking the Long Way Home." He argues that efficiency involves, by definition, making the least use of some limited resource, since if the resource were unlimited there would be no advantage in using less of it rather than more. What someone who takes a longer route home or refuses a ride on an ice-cream truck uses more of is time, but if his time isn't limited – if he has more than enough before he's due home – his doing so isn't inefficient and he's not playing a game. If his time is limited, however, for example if he needs to be home by sundown and taking the longer route risks missing that deadline, then if he chooses that route because he wants to overcome the obstacle it

involves, he is playing a game – he’s having a race against the sun (pp. 56-60).

Mitchell Berman gives a version of the ritual example intended to avoid this response. He imagines that the required sequence of events must be completed by a given time, say, that the candle must be lit by sundown. For people who start the ritual late, time isn’t an unlimited resource yet they still aren’t playing a game.<sup>25</sup>

We can again question whether lighting the candle is the ritual’s prelusory goal, or has the requisite primacy, but a further response to all the examples in this set comes from my amended lusory-attitude condition. In the normal case, someone who starts a ritual late isn’t trying to complete it in limited time because he wants to meet the challenge that poses; he just started late. But if he *is* trying to do that – if he intentionally delayed his start because he wanted to see if he could get done in the shorter time – then he is playing a game. Nor do most people who perform the ritual do so in order to meet a challenge, nor was it designed for that purpose. So even Berman’s time-limited ritual isn’t a game. Similarly, someone who refuses a truck ride while strolling around the lake doesn’t normally do so in order to make getting home more difficult, nor are most strollers trying to meet a challenge; their motive is again different. And if novel-readers don’t read the end of *Anna Karenina* first, it’s not because they want to make learning how Anna ends up more difficult; they aren’t interested in difficulty.

The disjunctive condition doesn’t fit all cases of this type perfectly. Consider someone who reads an Agatha Christie just out of curiosity and without trying to work out who did it. Doesn’t the second clause of the condition count her as playing a game, and isn’t that not what we say? There are two possible reasons why we might not say it. One is that, though many readers of detective novels treat them as puzzles, many don’t, so it’s not the case that *most*

readers of these novels have the restrictive lusory attitude. The other possible reason is that we take the relevant activity to be not the narrower one of reading a detective novel but the broader one of just reading a novel. Since most people who read novels aren't playing a game when they do so, neither is a non-puzzling Christie reader. One issue of detail about the condition was how exactly we interpret "your activity"; that issue may be relevant here.

Another difficulty comes from someone who finds old physics exams and starts doing them just for fun. Doesn't the first clause of the condition count him as playing a game, and isn't that again not what we say?<sup>26</sup> Perhaps here the force of the second clause is so strong it outweighs the first. Exams are so much an institution, and so overwhelmingly written from non-play motives, that the classification from the second clause overrides that from the first even when the first would call this person's activity a game.

In discussing his ritual example Berman considers a more restrictive reading of the lusory attitude, involving a desire to meet a challenge, but has as one objection that it doesn't fit all professional athletes.<sup>27</sup> This objection is met if the attitude condition is disjunctive. But his other objection is that the more narrowly defined attitude isn't found in games of chance; let's now consider them.<sup>28</sup>

As Scott Kretchmar notes, games of chance are, surprisingly, never mentioned in *The Grasshopper*.<sup>29</sup> This may be because they seem to fit its analysis straightforwardly. Consider rock, paper, scissors, and imagine it played without the idea that with skill you can anticipate your opponent's move, so it's just a game of chance. Your goal is to throw rock to your opponent's scissors, scissors to his paper, or paper to his rock, and the rules forbid the most efficient means of doing this because they forbid you to make your choice after you've seen his.

Likewise for roulette and bingo, which forbid you to place your bet after the wheel has stopped spinning or to get more turns than the other players.

But these games don't involve the restricted form of the lusory attitude we've been discussing, because they don't involve any desire to meet a challenge because it's a challenge; they involve no challenge. We come here to an ambiguity in the everyday concept of difficulty. In one sense a task is difficult if it requires a great deal of skill or effort; in another it's difficult if the probability of succeeding in it is low. The two senses often coincide, since often, and even usually, the more skill or effort an activity demands the less likely you are to reach its goal. But they can come apart. Raising a child is difficult in the first sense but arguably not in the second, since most parents succeed at it. Winning a lottery is difficult in the second sense but not in the first, because it involves no effort or skill.<sup>30</sup> The rules of games of chance make achieving their goal more difficult in the second, probabilistic sense but not in the first, and the lusory attitude they involve must therefore involve this second sense, so you accept the rules not in order to have a challenge but to enjoy the surprise, entertainment, or drama of having their outcome rest on luck.

I tacitly acknowledged this ambiguity when I described the most restrictive version of the lusory attitude as accepting the rules because they make the resulting activity more difficult and, "even more specifically," because they make succeeding in it a challenge. The "even more specifically" was meant to leave room for another form of preference for difficulty, one not concerned with challenge but just, we can now see, with probability. And we now face a choice. We can make the lusory-attitude condition even more disjunctive, so it requires you or most people to accept the rules *either* because they make the resulting activity more challenging *or*

because they make succeeding at it less probable, because more a matter of luck, and on that basis more attractive. Then the analysis will be more complex and less unified, but, because it's more permissive, will include games of chance. Or we can stick with the original specification of the lusory attitude as wanting just challenges as challenges. Then the analysis will retain its unity but won't fit games of chance and will be more reformist, or will depart further from the concept expressed by the word "game."

I find it hard to choose between these alternatives. Each has one of the two main virtues we look to in a proposal for conceptual reform but lacks the other, and it's hard to weigh these virtues against each other. Is it more important to have an analysis that's unified and explanatory or one that's close to an existing concept? To some, I suspect, the second alternative, which retains the original specification of the lusory attitude as wanting challenges, will seem most damaging to Suits, just because it captures fewer of what are commonly called games. But there's no reason why a proposal for conceptual reform can't be somewhat radical, and on this construal Suits's analysis does an exemplary job of unifying the activities it applies to and explaining both why it makes sense to group them together and why we find excellence in them valuable. Moreover there are reasons why our language may have come to express a less unified concept. One is just the ambiguity about difficulty discussed above. When the rules of a game of chance make success in it less probable, they do something the rules of a game requiring skill also usually do, and that makes the difference between the two harder to see. Another reason is the overlap between the concepts of game and play. Though English has different words for the two, the fact that most people who participate in games do so as a form of play can make it look as if any form of play governed by rules is a game. That too can blur an important difference.

Wittgenstein held that a unifying account can't be given for any of the things we call games, and it's still a refutation of his view to give this kind of account for a large subset of them, and especially to give it using an analysis with the internal connections and therefore beauty Suits's analysis has. I've argued that this analysis needs to be slightly revised, so it's lusory-attitude condition has a more complex disjunctive form than Suits intended, and slightly restricted, so it doesn't apply as broadly as he thought. But what remains after the revision and restriction is still a surprising and illuminating analysis of a concept many have thought the paradigm of ones that resist any such analysis.

## Notes

1. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005); 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2014). Bracketed page references are to the third edition.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), secs. 66-67.
3. Norman Geras, "Games and Meanings," in Stephen de Wijze, Matthew H. Kramer, and Ian Carter, eds., *Hillel Steiner and the Anatomy of Justice: Themes and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2009), 185-200, p. 188.
4. Colin McGinn, *Truth by Analysis: Games, Names, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 21-28, 64-65.
5. Thomas Hurka, "Games and the Good – I," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume* 80 (2006): 217-35; "Introduction" to *The Grasshopper*, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> editions.
6. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, p. 13; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1961), pp. 9-10. A similar list-analysis given in Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 36-45, though its elements are more closely related. On influence: while *The Grasshopper* has a respectable 710 citations in Google Scholar, Huizinga's book has 9629 and Caillois's 2780.
7. The importance of distinguishing the concepts of game and play is emphasized in

Chad Carlson, “The ‘Playing’ Field: Attitudes, Activities, and the Conflation of Play and Games,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38 (2011): 74-87; Carlson charges Suits to some extent with this conflation.

8. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 5, 14-27, 49-41, 42, 76-88, 89-104, 143-45; Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, pp. 6, 12, 15, 21, 30-31, 54-55, 78, 109.

9. Personal communication.

10. Geras, “Games and Meanings,” pp. 185.

11. Bernard Suits, “Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1988): 1-9.

12. Klaus V. Meier, “Triad Trickery: Playing With Sport and Games,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1988): 11-30, pp. 21-23.

13. C. Thi Nguyen, “The Forms and Fluidity of Game Play.”

14. Carlson equates play with any autotelic activity and therefore includes within it holding a deep conversation, playing music, and eating a delicious meal (“The ‘Playing’ Field,” pp. 77-78.

15. That Suits’s lusory-attitude condition admits of different interpretations has been noted by others. See e.g. John Tasioulas, “Games and the Good – II,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 80 (2006): 237-64, p. 238; Jonathan Ellis, “On the Concept of a Game,” *Philosophical Investigations* 34 (2011): 381-91, pp. 383-86; and Mitchell N. Berman, “Sprints, Sports, and Suits,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 40 (2013): 163-76, p. 170.

16. See e.g. Scott Kretchmar, “Gaming Up Life: Considerations for Game Expansions,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 35 (2008): 142-55, pp. 142-43, 145; Carlson, “The ‘Playing’

Field,” p. 80.

17. McGinn gives an example of this type (*Truth By Analysis*, p. 24) but doesn't see that it poses a problem for Suits.

18. Caillois also included exam-writing as a form of game/play; see *Man, Play and Games*, pp. 109, 113.

19. Thomas M. Malaby, “Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games,” *Games and Culture* 2 (2007): 95-113; Gordon Calleja, “Erasing the Magic Circle,” in John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim, and Tarjei Mandt Larsen, eds, *The Philosophy of Computer Games* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 77-91, pp. 84-86.

20. Tasioulas, “Games and the Good - II,” p. 238; Kieran Setiya, “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” [ideasofimperfection.blogspot.ca/2008/01/and-and-grasshopper\\_17.html](http://ideasofimperfection.blogspot.ca/2008/01/and-and-grasshopper_17.html); also Geras, “Games and Meanings,” pp. 195-96. The force of Tasioulas's examples is questioned in Ellis, “On the Concept of a Game,” pp. 384-86.

21. Tim Button, Review of McGinn, *Truth By Analysis*, *Analysis* 71 (2013): 577-80, p. 579.

22. Tasioulas, “Games and the Good – II,” pp. 238-39; Setiya, “The Ant and the Grasshopper”; Berman, “Sprints, Sports, and Suits,” pp. 168-72.

23. Geras, “Games and Meanings,” pp. 197-98

24. Bernard Suits, “The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12 (1985): 200-19.

25. Berman, “Sprints, Sports, and Suits,” pp. 168-69.

26. Ellis gives the example of someone writing exams for fun in “On the Concept of a Game,” p. 388.

27. Berman, "Sprints, Sports, and Suits," p. 171

28. Berman, "Sprints, Sports, and Suits," p. 171; that Suits's analysis doesn't fit games of chance is also argued by Tasioulas, "Games and the Good – II," p. 240. Geras's counterexamples of Caractacus Potts and The Chore ("Games and Meanings," pp 185-86) and Button's of picture consequences (Review of McGinn, p. 579) are, though not institutionalized games of chance, likewise activities in which the outcome is intentionally left to luck.

29. Kretchmar, "Gaming Up Life," pp. 148-50; Kretchmar thinks Suits's analysis does fit these games but that, because of his commitment to an evaluative thesis about meeting challenges, Suits mistakenly failed to apply it to them.

30. The distinction between these two senses of difficulty is drawn in Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).