

GAMES AND PASTIMES

Playing a game, Bernard Suits memorably declares, is to engage in “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (41).¹ This slogan follows and encapsulates his longer and more exact account:²

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].

Suits defends his account of playing games at length. Yet for all its virtues, it seems to me to leave out something essential. It is this: *Games have winners and losers*.

Suits has much to say about winners and losers, to be sure. But what he says is strictly speaking no part of his account of playing games, as I shall argue. Instead, Suits’s definition describes not games but part of the broader category of *pastimes*: purposeful rule-governed activities engaged in for their own sake,³ themselves a subspecies of leisure activities (such as stamp collecting). All games are pastimes, but not conversely. We can, and often do, pass the time in structured activities that are not quite games, though they may share some features with games. Some pastimes even involve playing; yet they are not thereby games, for, as Suits reminds us, not all playing is playing a game (15–16). The line between games and pastimes is drawn with reference to winning or losing. Games are pastimes in which there can be winners or losers—though there need not be: some games end inconclusively, in ties, draws, stalemate, and the like; the important thing is the possibility of winning or losing.⁴ This simple point has several deep

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Philosophical Association meetings in 2005.

¹ Otherwise unattributed references and citations are taken Suits [1978].

² The longer account is a minor revision of the definition presented more informally on 34, to which Suits adds his freshly-minted technical terminology in square brackets.

³ The term ‘pastime’ needs no apologies, but I will note that Suits uses it in this very sense when Skepticus mentions playing House to the Grasshopper (90): “Ah yes, to be sure; you are talking about pastimes which are essentially types of make-believe.” The same usage occurs on 137.

⁴ There are winners and losers in activities that are not pastimes, such as warfare, but this does not make such activities games. For one thing, the participants are not playing. The restriction to pastimes, as Suits has inadvertently defined them, is necessary.

consequences. But first I must convince you that Suits has left winning and losing out of his account.

Here is an argument for that conclusion. Inspect the definition of games offered by Suits. He describes the prelusory goal, lusory means, constitutive rules, and lusory attitude. Nowhere does he mention winning or losing. Therefore, winning and losing are not part of Suits’s account.

No doubt this argument, simple as it is, seems too simple to support its conclusion. Perhaps so. I shall defend it nevertheless.

Neither lusory means nor constitutive rules, concerned as they are with the ways in which a game is played, say anything about winning or losing. The prelusory goal, though, describes the state of affairs that counts as winning in the game, and the lusory attitude seems to involve trying to win the game; Suits clearly takes these components of his definition to cover winning (and by implication losing) from the beginning, when, in the course of building up to his definition, he identifies several ends involved in games (34):

There must be an end which is distinct from winning because it is the restriction of means to this other end which makes winning possible and also defines, in any given game, what it means to win. . . . First there is the end which consists simply in a certain state of affairs: a juxtaposition of pieces on a board, saving a friend’s life, crossing a finish line. Then, when a restriction of means for attaining this end is made with the introduction of rules, we have a second end, winning. Finally, with the stipulation of what it means to win, a third end emerges: the activity of trying to win—that is, playing the game.

Some “specific achievable state of affairs” (36)—later dubbed the prelusory goal—is designated as an end, and the permissible means to attain this end are limited by the rules (so that it must be pursued inefficiently with respect to all possible means of attaining it); an agent can then try to bring about the end in accordance with the rules, precisely for the sake of so doing (the lusory attitude). Suits takes this to describe a game born entirely from the ideal of winning: the designated end is the state of affairs that counts as winning if achieved in accordance with the rules, and the actions of the players are intelligible only as attempts to win. Yet I think he is wrong to interpret his definition this way, and that his confusion leads him into several mistakes.

Consider how Suits introduces his discussion of the player’s ends: “there must be an end which is *distinct from winning*” (my emphasis). This is not a mere slip. Suits repeats this claim from an earlier example, in which he declares that “there is an end in chess analytically distinct from winning” (33). He further expands it in his explanation of the prelusory goal, which “can be described before, or independently of, any game of which it may

be, or come to be, a part”—in contrast to the end of winning, which “can be described only in terms of the game in which it figures, and winning may accordingly be called the *lusory* goal of the game” (37). These claims come on the heels of a reasoned distinction among ends (36 my emphasis):

Thus, if we were to ask a long-distance runner his purpose in entering a race. . . He might reply 1/ that his purpose is to participate in a long-distance race, or 2/ that his purpose is to win the race, or 3/ that his purpose is to cross the finish line ahead of the other contestants. It should be noted that these responses are *not* merely three different formulations of one and the same purpose.

Quite right: the prelusory goal is one thing, the lusory goal another, even if attaining one must *ipso facto* mean attaining the other. Thus winning and losing are not and cannot be part of the prelusory goal as it appears in the definition.

The last candidate standing, then, is the lusory attitude. Here is how Suits defines it: “where the [constitutive] rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity,” that is, the constrained and inefficient attempt to bring about the prelusory goal. However, neither winning nor losing is implicit in accepting rules just because they make it possible to engage in an attempt to bring about a given state of affairs in accordance with the accepted rules. Therefore, *trying to bring about the prelusory goal* in accordance with rules, even precisely for the sake of so doing, is an activity distinct from *trying to win*. It is merely trying to bring about a certain state of affairs as the result of rule-governed activity engaged in for its own sake. That state of affairs may count as winning in a game, but nothing Suits says requires that the agent be pursuing the prelusory goal (whatever it may be) *as* the lusory goal of a game. It is merely the object of constrained and inefficient means adopted for their own sake, regardless of whatever status it may have in a game. The lusory attitude, as Suits explains it, is indifferent to any ends the agent has apart from adopting rules for the sake of the activity they make possible, which in and of itself has nothing to do with winning or losing.

The four component parts of Suits’s definition—prelusory goal, lusory means, constitutive rules, and lusory attitude—spell out the states of affairs, permissible means, rule-governed actions, and ends for the sake of which the agent acts, independently of what their status in a game may or may not be. Hence I conclude that winning and losing are not, strictly speaking, part of Suits’s account of games.

Is it overly fastidious to insist on this point? I think not. Suits has argued effectively that games are intentional enterprises, defined, at least in part, by the aims, goals, and intentions of those who play them (and hence

are intensional as well). The nature of the activity is a function of the agent's intentions. To insist that playing a game requires the agent/player to intend to *win* the game (under the constraints noted) is to mark off game-playing as a kind of activity distinct from any other, whether extensionally equivalent to it or not. Furthermore, the fact that games have winners and losers tells against several activities Suits countenances as games from being games, as we shall see.

Two objections. First, Suits could be taken as *stipulating* the meaning of 'winning' when he says that attaining the prelusory goal "*defines*, in any given game, what it means to win" (34 cited above; my emphasis).⁵ If so, then 'winning' is no more than achieving a specific state of affairs in accordance with the rules, as described, which is why Suits freely moves from describing the attainment of the prelusory goal to the claim that this is winning the game as part of the lusory attitude.

Yet the problem with stipulative definitions is that they are, well, stipulative. No argument is possible, but nothing is gained, either, since we are told rather than persuaded that this is a reasonable way to understand what it is to win. It is an open question whether the activity made possible by the constitutive rules includes anything that would be recognized in a game as a winning move—that is, whether the sort of rule-governed activity pursued for its own sake takes the attainment of the prelusory goal to count as winning the game—and hence it is an open question whether the activity is, properly speaking, a game. We cannot appeal to the fact that we identify the prelusory goal by its role in a game, since it is the *prelusory* goal and so has been stripped of its game functions. Likewise, pursuit of the prelusory goal may attain something that in fact is a winning state in a game, but we cannot appeal to that fact either, since the lusory attitude makes no reference to the ludic features of any state of affairs. But Suits wants to define *games*, though he has given us a game-free characterization of gaming activity; rather than settle the question by stipulation, we should be given reasons to think that winning a game can be explained in game-free terms. Otherwise there is no reason to accept his proposed stipulation.

The second objection maintains that the connection between the prelusory goal and winning the game is so tight that my scruples about intensionally identifying games have no place. After all, attaining the prelusory goal is not a means toward winning the game, it *is* winning the game, or

⁵ Note that Suits continues: "Finally, with the *stipulation* of what it means to win, a third end emerges: the activity of trying to win the game." The import of passages like this suggest strongly that Suits was simply stipulating what it means to win, as he says.

at least constitutes it; there is no way to prise them apart. There cannot be rule-governed activity of the appropriate sort directed at attaining the prelusory goal that is not thereby aimed at winning the game. The one is the other. Hence the lusory attitude is directed at winning the game, just as Suits says.

Yet this objection is mistaken. Extensional identity, no matter how tight, is not enough to ensure intensional identity. As long as *attaining the prelusory goal* is intensionally distinct from *winning the game* (and it must be since the former refers only to states of affairs and the latter to ludic features), activity directed at one is not thereby directed at the other. That is how intensionality works. Now it might be further objected that this is quibbling; the question really is whether any agent could sensibly be said to aim at the prelusory goal yet *not* aim at winning the game. I claim that this is indeed possible—one may be intended and the other merely foreseen, so there is a ‘double effect’ distinction at work here—and call as my witness Bernard Suits, who describes a case of exactly this kind (39–40): Smith, who knows nothing of games, wants to travel from A to C and proposes to go through B as the most efficient route; he is, however, told that there is a rule against so doing, with which he reluctantly complies. In the course of grumbling about the rule, however, he complains to Jones:

SMITH: Why should they tell me that I can’t go through B?

JONES: Oh, I see. They must have thought you were in the race.

SMITH: The what?

Smith has been traveling from A to C by inefficient means (avoiding B) to attain the prelusory goal of being at A, and doing so precisely to conform to the rules—perhaps because he is an inveterate rule-follower; Suits doesn’t say, and we don’t care. But Smith is not aware that he is playing a game, since he doesn’t recognize that his goal of being at A using only inefficient means permitted by rules is to win a game. Yet no one can play a game without being aware that he or she is playing a game. (There are games with unwitting participants, but these are better described as *e.g.* one-player two-person games.) Hence attaining the prelusory goal and winning the game are distinct ends, as Suits dramatically illustrates, and as he has said all along.

The objections are ineffective. The conclusion that winning and losing are no part of Suits’s account of games stands. However, the example of Smith shows that without winning and losing we cannot have someone playing a game. Therefore, we should modify Suits’s account to include winning and losing.

One option that is *not* open to us is to say that only some games have

winner and loser, so it is a good thing Suits did not include them in his definition. But that is to misunderstand what Suits was doing, even if he was confused about winning and losing. Suits is clear that his goal is to produce a definition, *i. e.* a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, for what it is to be a game. If winning and losing were part of Suits's definition (as he sometimes seems to think they are), then any game would perforce have a state of affairs that counted as winning, and playing the game would be a matter of trying to win by reaching that state of affairs. Since Suits devotes several chapters to arguing that what he calls "games of make-believe" are games according to his account, he would be saddled with the unfortunate consequence that playing House (say) is an enterprise that has winners, which sounds like nothing so much as a bad joke:

FATHER: What were you and Amanda doing?

DAUGHTER: Playing House.

FATHER: How delightful! Who won?

If we concede to Suits that make-believe activities are games—a claim I find questionable and will call into question shortly—the sheer implausibility of thinking that make-believe activities such as playing House have winners and losers, as according to Suits they must, should give us pause. By the same token, if winning and losing are not part of Suits's definition, then they are merely accidental features of (some) games. Furthermore, all games would be identifiable as games without reference to the fact that they are meant to be won, since essential features do not depend on accidental ones, and so playing a game to win would be no part of what makes the game a game.⁶ Suits himself takes games to be a species of "trying and achieving" activities, where the player has gameplaying as an end and also winning (thereby ending) the game as an end,⁷ which suggests that when the chips are down he recognizes that winning and losing ought to be part of his account. I agree. Faced with the all-or-nothing choice, it is better to deny that winning and losing are merely accidental features of games such as chess (which are unquestionably games), with the consequence that

⁶ In this case all players would be "triflers" as Suits understands the term (45–46), since they need not be trying to win when playing the game—surely a perverse result. There are logical alternatives, to be sure; we might maintain that games of winning and losing are a subspecies of games, namely those to which winning and losing are essential, while games themselves need not have winners or losers. Yet it seems odd to me to insist that chess does not involve winning *qua* game (even if it does *qua* particular kind of game), while other activities that do not seem game-like are counted—but the argument for this will be made as part of explaining why Suits is wrong to count certain activities as games, as will be argued shortly.

⁷ See 80–81, as part of his reply to Kolnai [1966].

activities without winners or losers are not games.⁸

To incorporate the claim that games involve winning and losing, we start with a simple revision of Suits’s own definition, as follows: To play a game is to try to win as defined by the game [lusory goal], namely by achieving a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal]... and so on, as Suits has it. With this additional requirement, the actions of the players can be explicated in terms of winning the game, not merely in attaining some state of affairs in a particular way. In a slogan, players have lusory as well as prelusory goals.⁹

The revised account of games has the consequence that activities that do not include the possibility of winning or losing cannot be games; in particular, certain pastimes and what Suits calls “games of make-believe” are not games at all. This seems right to me. Your mileage may vary. I shall try to make it plausible. Suits was led to think that these activities are games in part because he was confused over whether winning and losing were part of his definition. Fortunately, there are also independent reasons to hold that such activities are not games, no matter what Suits thought. Instead, as I shall argue, they are mere pastimes in the sense defined above: rule-governed activities engaged in for their own sake, where winning has no place—the feature that distinguishes mere pastimes from games. Now Suits, wrongly in my view, takes as games two types of pastime typified, respectively, by Taking the Long Way Home and by House. A closer look at each is in order.

First, Taking the Long Way Home: an activity whose only rule prescribes taking the longer rather than the shorter way around to get home (52–53). Arguably inefficient as a means to the goal of being at home, even when engaged in for its own sake it still is no game. (If you do not share this intuition I abandon you to a fun-filled world of ‘games’ such as Counting Holes in the Ceiling, Channel Roulette, and, my favourite, Follow the Stranger—all pastimes, none games.) Suits argues that Taking the Long

⁸ Against the proposal that games must have winners and losers, Suits put forward the objection that this would mean someone practicing golf would not be practicing a game, since one neither wins nor loses a practice. I will bite the bullet: he is not practicing a game, but practicing to be able to play a game. Golf practice is not like a baseball “practice game” (or exhibition match), where the game is played in earnest, though perhaps not part of the regular season; it is more like a sparring round for a boxer.

⁹ The inclusion of lusory goals also makes clear what is objectionable about the trifter: he violates one of the definitional requirements of any game, namely that a player try to win. Spelling this out precisely requires some further complications in the revised definition, as we shall see.

Way Home is not a game because the means it prescribes are not, strictly speaking, inefficient with respect to getting home; inefficiency is a matter of using more rather than less of some relatively scarce resource, and Smith's taking the long way home need not be inefficient in this technical sense (54), for his time and his shoe leather may be relatively abundant for him (55). Thus far Suits seems bang in the gold. Why not conclude, then, that Taking the Long Way Home is not a game but a mere pastime? Suits offers a surprising final diagnosis (56):

We must, then, stipulate that some resource relevant to his getting home is limited for Smith. Let us say that his time is limited. . . . Let us say that Smith wants to get home before dark, that the sun has begun to set, and that the distance to his house is such that taking the longer way risks, to some extent, the outcome. Under these circumstances, it seems clear, taking the longer way is less efficient than taking the shorter way. And if Smith has no purpose in taking the longer route aside from his wish to engage in the activity such an obstacle makes possible, I submit that he is playing a game; specifically, he is having a race with the sun.

I submit that Smith is not playing a game. Grant Suits his assumptions: Smith's time is limited, and taking the longer way home might not get him there before sunset. He might nevertheless take the longer way because he finds the level of risk acceptable, and he takes the longer way simply to take it, with no ulterior purpose.¹⁰ Now *we* might describe Smith as "having a race with the Sun," but that is not material; what matters is what *Smith* takes himself to be doing. I submit he is doing the same thing as before, namely taking the long way home for its own sake, as an idle pastime. Smith is trying to reach the prelusory goal (being at home before sunset) via some inefficient means (taking the long way home) he adopts to make his activity (getting home before sunset while taking the long way home) possible. Smith need not think of himself as racing with the Sun. He may be doing no more than passing his scarce time by taking a longer rather than a shorter way around. The scarcity of his time does not affect his aims and intentions, and thus does not change what he takes himself to be up to. Hence Smith is not playing a game. He might even foresee that it is an open question whether he will get home before the Sun sets, but not take it as an end to get home before the Sun sets. In short, Smith need not be pursuing a lusory goal.

Suits, I submit, has confused the pastime Taking the Long Way Home

¹⁰ Smith may have further motives and purposes: accepting rules 'just because' they make an activity possible does not exclude other reasons, as Suits argues (144–145). Professionals play games for the money, but the point is that they *play games* for the money, not do something else.

with the game Racing With the Sun. No wonder, since they are closely related. To turn Taking the Long Way Home from a mere pastime requires only a subtle change: Smith has to take arriving at home before sunset, despite taking the long way around, to be *winning* (as part of the game). Smith then is engaged in a race with the Sun, trying to stay ahead of it all the way home, so to speak. Unless Smith is aware of his activities as part of a game and directs them to winning the game, he is engaged in a mere pastime, even if from our perspective it looks all the world as though he is playing a game. This, of course, is a feature of intentional action: the agent's intentions cannot be read off his mere behaviour. Hence the addition that Smith is trying to win, that he pursue a lusory goal as well as a prelusory goal. Smith is only racing (hence playing a game) if he takes himself to be trying to win by getting home before the Sun sets. But that is precisely what is absent from Suits's analysis above.

It is all too easy to confuse certain pastimes with games, for only subtle differences in intention separate the two. But they are the differences that make the difference—not only in Taking the Long Way Home *vs.* Racing With the Sun, but in a wide variety of activities.

Take a classic pastime: Catch. I throw the ball to you in such a way that you can catch it, whereupon you throw it back to me likewise; if the ball is dropped, pick it up and resume. Repeat until dinnertime. There are no winners or losers, and no particular point to Catch other than the trivial one specified by the rules, namely to catch the ball, to pick it up when dropped, and to throw it in a 'catchable' way to another player—all of which we may summarize by saying that the point of Catch is to keep the ball in play. No penalty or special status is attached to dropping the ball, just as none is to catching it or to throwing it in a designedly catchable way. Catch passes the time but is not a game.¹¹ We do speak loosely of "a *game* of Catch," but evidence of this sort is defeasible. Ring Around the Rosie is called a game when in reality it is a choreographed dance routine to vocal accompaniment (92), for instance. Catch, like Taking the Long Way Home, is a rule-governed activity pursued for its own sake. Yet even if we stretch the notion of a 'state of affairs' to include *keeping the ball in play*, as Suits does to make it the prelusory goal (135), the Pastime of Catch has no lusory goal. Indeed, it may not have the requisite inefficiency. Time, for a mere pastime, is not a scarce resource. (It is admittedly an inefficient way of getting a ball into someone else's hands, but that is part of the

¹¹ Suits, I think, does take Catch to be a game—at least, this is a plausible way to read his remarks about Ping-Pong Volley (133–134).

prelusory goal and hence not the relevant kind of inefficiency.) The mistake involved in confusing the Pastime of Catch with the Game of Catch shows up in two ways. First, if we grant with Suits that the point is to keep the ball in play, then for Suits attaining that goal is constitutive of winning, since he confuses the prelusory and lusory goals—but that means merely keeping the ball in play would count as ‘winning’, in which case engaging in the Pastime of Catch at all would count as ‘winning’ at it, which is surely an error. Second, Suits is driven to find some efficient means proscribed by the rules to keeping the ball in play, so Catch counts as a game; he suggests that a machine or pair of machines could be devised to keep the ball in play more reliably than the players could (136). Desperate times call for desperate measures, but this truly is desperation: what activity could not be rendered inefficient by imaginary “machines expertly devised for the purpose” of reaching the goal?

Suits is misled into thinking of Catch as a game, I believe, because it is easy to make it into one. Change the rule covering dropped balls so that if a ball is dropped, the player who drops it *loses*—is eliminated from further play; the winner is the last one left standing. Each player tries to keep the ball in play, *i. e.* not to drop the ball, as a means of winning. (Hence ‘keeping the ball in play’ is ambiguous: in the Pastime of Catch it includes picking up dropped balls and carrying on, in the Game of Catch it means not dropping the ball.) The Game of Catch has a clear inefficiency, namely having to throw the ball in a “catchable” way (it is much easier to eliminate someone by throwing the ball where it cannot be caught); it also has a clear lusory goal, namely to be the last one standing.¹² This version of Catch is clearly a game. We gain nothing by insisting that the Pastime of Catch is likewise a game. In the wild, so to speak, Catch seems to me a pastime rather than a game; but we need not insist upon the point. All that matters is that the two not be confused.¹³

What Suits calls “games of make-believe,” such as House, or Cops and Robbers, are, I claim, strictly analogous to Catch, and so we may then

¹² There is a more complex Game of Catch which is closer to the Pastime of Catch, which we may describe as follows (using terminology to be introduced shortly): Change the rule so that dropping the ball is a game-ending move, where ‘winning’ is a matter of the greatest time elapsed in keeping the ball in play—if we manage to not drop the ball for longer than we ever have before, we win. Here there is no winning or losing move, but the play is ‘scored’ by the elapsed time for overall winning and losing. This Game of Catch is a cooperative game.

¹³ Similarly, Suits conflates the Pastime of Flirting with indefinitely putting off the goal of the Game of Seduction (134).

reasonably conclude that they are pastimes rather than games. I shall now argue that there is a strict analogy between Catch and House.

When activities such as House are introduced, Suits declares that they are “essentially types of make-believe” (90), which he assimilates without argument to role-playing games. Put aside for now the claim that they are games; the move from make-believe to role-playing is surely too fast. We can imagine that the rug is a poisonous ocean and the furniture islands, so that we have to jump from chair to couch to remain safe—pure make-believe play without roles. There are many such examples, having to do with play and imagination, but let us be charitable and take Suits to have deliberately restricted the scope of his discussion to make-believe activities that do involve role-playing: House, Cops and Robbers, Seduction, Cowboys and Indians, the case of Sneak and Drag.¹⁴ All these activities, Suits maintains, are each a “reciprocating system of role-performance maximization” (112), a claim that is neither obvious nor, on its face, readily understood. What he has in mind is this. In each activities, the players adopt dramatic roles to play, and they strive to do what is called in the theatre “keeping character”: to keep up the dramatic pretense and continue to occupy their roles. This is a collaborative endeavor, since my actions have to make it possible (or at least not make it impossible) for you to keep up your character—thus the reciprocal system, which maximizes the length of performance for all of the players, since arguably none of them can continue once one of them has broken character; hence “role-performance maximization.” The parallels with Catch are evident. In playing Catch, each player tries to keep the ball in play, which requires him to throw the ball to another player in a ‘catchable’ way (or at least not make it impossible for the other player to catch), just as in playing House a player must perform his dramatic role regarding another player in a ‘playable’ way (or at least not make it impossible for the other player to keep up his role). The whole point of each activity is to keep on going.¹⁵

Like Catch, House is in the wild a pastime: Suits’s contrast between

¹⁴ It is perhaps worth mentioning that Suits seems to regard his claims about such activities to be an extension of his original definition: the Grasshopper does not initially accept that role-playing activities are games (91–93), being role-governed rather than goal-governed, and several tortuous chapters follow in which Suits tries to establish that his original definition will cover them. Better to go with the Grasshopper’s first response, I say.

¹⁵ Or so says Suits. I am dubious that House has a point other than role-playing, and that this does not intrinsically involve maximizing the chances to keep role-playing in the way Suits describes. But I will concede him the point for the sake of the argument.

Jones, who passes the time in a railway station by playing the Game of Solitaire, and Jones's daughter, who plays House to kill time, is entirely apt. For that is indeed what it is to play House, namely to assume a dramatic role, indefinitely. The one-player Pastime of House is not readily made into a game, but, as with Catch, we can make it into one by saying that the goal is to keep up the dramatic role as long as possible, so that breaking character, in essence, is a losing move. Just like the Game of Catch, the point of which is to play for longer than ever, so too the Game of House. But that is not, I submit, how House is usually played, which is why it's harder to turn House from a pastime into a game than it is Catch. It is easier with multiplayer versions of House,¹⁶ since there the need to maintain a collective enterprise of make-believe is more challenging and hence more readily subject to failure.

The other role-playing activities Suits describes are more like games, but not for the reasons Suits offers. Take first Cops and Robbers (or its politically incorrect variant Cowboys and Indians). As pastimes, they are no more than excuses to run around, shout, and mimic shooting, dying, scalping, whatever, with no particular end in sight. ("Dying" is often followed by near-instantaneous resurrection, for instance.) But there are closely related versions that *are* games, and, if memory serves, this is how these activities were usually undertaken. There are two teams, the Cowboys/Cops and the Robbers/Indians; each side is permitted its imaginary death weapons, such as pistols, revolvers, bows and arrows, whatever; in some area that allows for stealth, the teams fan out, and one by one a series of imaginary killings takes place. Best of all is not to die, but the point is to at least be on the winning team, that is, the team left standing (in however many members) when all the players on the other team have been dispatched. The lines between the pastime and the game are often blurred due to inconclusive arguments about who killed whom, but one the former just passes the time whereas the latter is a straightforward game between teams.¹⁷

The case of Porphyrio Sneak clinches the matter. (A similar argument could be made for Bartholomew Drag.) As Suits describes it, Sneak is a double, triple, or more agent, who enjoys playing the role of being a spy, to the point of seeking out ever more complex levels of betrayal and skul-

¹⁶ Here is how to turn multiplayer House into a game: Any player who 'breaks character' is eliminated, and the winner is the last one left. The fuzziness in determining when someone is acting in character or out of character is perhaps what keeps the Game of House from being widely played.

¹⁷ Suits confuses the distinction between pastimes and games with his distinction between open and closed games. More on the latter below.

duggery to better exercise his role-playing talents (102–103). Thus far a typical pastime. But then Suits proposes that Sneak learns how to make countermoves to his own moves of international espionage, and so began “the Mad Months” when Sneak role-played against himself, until he could keep it up no more, and collapsed (104); subsequent analysis showed that this was due to Sneak’s efforts to keep playing as long as he could (109). But then Suits has turned a pastime into a game, precisely along the lines of Catch, since dropping the ball (breaking character) would be a losing move, in a one-person two-role game. In a telling simile, Sneak likens his condition to playing badminton games with himself—but they are not ordinary games, but the Game of Badminton Volley, where the point is to keep the shuttlecock in play. In other words, the Game of Catch.

As with Catch, there are serious difficulties in Suits’s attempt to spell out the prelusory goal and the inefficiencies that enter into the constitutive rules of make-believe role-playing activities which he takes to be games. The prelusory goal, as noted, is the continued furtherance of the role-playing each involves. Here Suits is led astray by the role-based (rather than goal-based) character of such activities, thinking that the continuation of role-play is a contentful prelusory goal, when in fact it is only a trivially thin redescription of the activity itself. Just as *keeping the ball in play* is just another way to describe Catch, so too *performing one’s role* is just another way to describe dramatic activity. Worse, since Suits (mistakenly) takes winning and losing to be part of his definition of games, to engage in Catch or House at all is to ‘win’ at it. If the prelusory goal is, however, to maximize the activity,¹⁸ then we are moving from pastimes to games, though without noting that a lusory goal is also needed.

Suits is also driven to find an inefficient means in the ordinary pastime of House (or even the Game of House) to make it satisfy his definition. After the several chapters devoted to Reverse English, it is disappointing to be told in one brief paragraph that the inefficiency in role-playing activities stems from the lack of a script (137). On its face the proposal is absurd. How could it be inefficient to improvise (which could go on indefinitely) rather than to memorize an indefinitely large script? But there is a deeper issue at stake. Suits has gotten hold of one version of the distinction between composition and improvisation, perhaps unwittingly, and has made the all-

¹⁸ Note that Suits slides from the undeniable fact that House is playable *indefinitely* to the much less plausible claim that it is meant to be played *as long as possible*. The latter is revisionary, to make it a game, and not, I would argue, part of House as it is usually played—and not all playing, as Suits reminds us, is playing a game. We can play at pastimes perfectly well.

too-common error of thinking that improvisation is inefficient composition. It is not, which is why jazz is not merely under-rehearsed classical music. Likewise it is one thing to perform a play of House by taking on a role, another to improvise a role in an ongoing performance of House. But if we keep the Pastime of House distinct from the Game of House, we will not be tempted to follow Suits down this path.

I conclude that it is a virtue of the revised account of games that such make-believe activities need not count as games, and that when they do they do so in virtue of incorporating lusory goals in a straightforward way.

Yet a complication has already put in an unheralded appearance. In the Game of Catch, winning was defined as being the last one left standing once other players have been eliminated, that is, once all the other players have lost. The catch (so to speak) is that there is no substantive non-ludic way to specify what counts as winning the game. If we are not willing to accept gerrymandered states of affairs like *being the only player not to lose* as a contentful prelusory goal—and we shouldn't accept it, since a *prelusory* goal, in contrast to a *lusory* goal, ought not refer to winning or losing—then the revised account must be re-revised to recognize that playing a game is as much a matter of trying not to lose as it is striving to win. Here, then, is a second shot: To play a game is to attempt to win rather than lose as defined by the game [lusory goal], which consists in achieving or avoiding a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal]. . . *etc.*

More complications are in store. As Aristotle would remind us, winning and losing are opposed as contraries rather than contradictories. They cannot be simultaneously true of a player, but they can be simultaneously false, for some games end without producing a winner or a loser, for instance matches ending in a tie or chess games ending in stalemate. (Such activities must be open to the possibility of winning or losing to be games, however.) Furthermore, winning, like losing, need not be exclusive. A game may have multiple winners, just as it may have multiple losers. In Racing With the Sun, Smith and Jones may win by getting home via the longer way before sunset, whereas Janofsky and Garfinkel do not and therefore lose. In this case the players are not competing with one another; rather, each player is competing against the Sun directly. Racing With the Sun can be played by any number. It is part of the logic of this game that an n -player version is equivalent to n races run separately, once for each player. This is not true in general for multiplayer games. Racing With the Sun is the sum of individual races against the Sun because the players compete not with one another but against a non-player (the Sun), or more exactly

against a fixed time.¹⁹ In the majority of multiplayer games, however, the players do compete against one another. Suits suggests that the basic distinction to be drawn is between competitive and cooperative games, which he proposes is a matter of whether the game is “closed” (having a definite ending) or “open” (able to be played indefinitely)—in turn a matter of whether we have a standard goal-based game or a role-based game (137–128). He is right that further clarity is needed on these matters, but I do not find his distinctions useful, in part because he does not link them to lusory goals. Let us say, instead, that a (multiplayer) game is *competitive* when one player’s winning makes it less likely that another player is also able to win. Multiplayer games permitting only a single winner are fully competitive, since any one player’s winning guarantees that no other player wins. Likewise, multiplayer games not permitting more than one but not all players to win are partially competitive. Not all games are competitive, of course. Winning and losing do not necessitate competition, as Solitaire (or any single-player game) proves. Indeed, multiplayer games are *cooperative* when one player’s winning makes it more likely that another player is also able to win. Note that some games are both cooperative and competitive: team sports are the obvious example, where cooperation among teammates increases the likelihood that team members win, in part by direct competition against the other team(s), increasing the likelihood that their players will not win. Working out when cooperative games generate cooperation among players is a mathematical exercise I leave to the reader.

As contraries, winning and losing need not be the only options available. A game might define winning and losing but end with some players who have neither won nor lost; failing to win need not be equivalent to losing. That is why competitive games were defined in the previous paragraph solely in terms of winning. Now in a game that defines only winning, it is natural to take *losing* as *failing to win*, but distinguishing the two lends analytic clarity to the many games that draw the distinction. Winning and losing are generally contraries; some games make them subcontraries, and hence contradictories, as well, but it is worth keeping the lines straight even in games that blur them. In fact, what counts as winning, or as losing, may depend on how the game ends. Hence a tricky triad of interrelated notions needs to be clarified to revise the account of games properly: winning, losing, and ending.

Chess is a game that defines winning and losing as types of *move*, that

¹⁹ The pastime Taking the Long Way Home does not essentially involve the Sun (really the sunset); it could be made instead into a race to get home in less than ten minutes, or before lunch is served, or the like.

is, as actions permitted by the rules and able to be performed by the players. Moves in this sense are not limited to sequential turns wherein each player performs one of a limited number of options at her disposal; tennis players and wrestlers make moves as much as chess players. The lusory goal of Chess is to make the winning move while avoiding the losing move. Of course, to win is to capture the opponent's King, to lose to have one's King captured. A winning or losing move in Chess is also an ending move. However, a game of Chess can be abandoned by mutual consent, so that it ends with no winner or loser; it may also be declared to end if a certain pattern of moves occurs (the same move-and-response three times in a row). These are not moves in the game—at least, the former is not; the latter is arguable, and I shall not argue about it now. In Chess, then, a player aims to win if possible, force a stalemate otherwise, and avoid losing. These outcomes are hierarchically ordered in terms of the player's success as defined by the rules of the game—a broader notion than winning, though analytically tied to it, and absent from Suits's account.

Winning and losing need not be types of moves. In the Game of Catch, winning is not a move, although losing is; the game ends when only one player is left, so that ending and winning are the same, though neither is a move. Many familiar games define 'scoring moves' and then end after a set period of time or the occurrence of some event; winning is defined in such cases as having the highest (or perhaps lowest) score when the game ends: soccer, football, basketball conform to this model. Baseball, however, is a hybrid game. It is played only for a fixed number of 'rounds' (innings) but each has an ending move (being the third of a series of outs).²⁰ Likewise, Boxing may go for a fixed number of rounds, but it also includes a game-winning and game-ending move (the knockout), though the move might never be made in a given match. All sorts of combination are possible. In scored games generally there need be no winning, losing, or ending moves; the games end according to some constitutive rule and a scoring system is used to determine the winners and losers. The lusory goal is, as always, to win, or more broadly to succeed as well as possible given the possibilities offered by the game. The prelusory goal, given how winning is determined, is to have the highest score when the game ends. This is not a game 'position' but may be attained through game moves, and hence through lusory means and the lusory attitude as Suits explains them; for our purposes it is enough to note that in such games winning essentially depends on ending, which

²⁰ Baseball could be analyzed as a series of scored subgames (innings) with an overall rule for winning, which suggests that it is fundamentally akin to a tournament. Not all games have subgames, to be sure; chess does not.

must therefore be part of the analysis.

Games need not end to produce winners. If winning is nonexclusive, there could be a winning move that some player could make without thereby causing the game to end. If winning is exclusive there may be no point to continuing once a winning move has been made, although there might be: the remaining players might battle it out to see which of them loses, though the rest cannot win. A nonexclusive winning game might never end, even in principle. If there is a regular influx of players and the permanent possibility of winning or losing, an endless game might be played. Ending, like losing, need not be defined in any given game; but either winning or losing must be—otherwise we have a mere pastime rather than a game.²¹

A proper account of games, it seems, must describe success in the game. What counts as success is specific to each game: winning, or at least not losing, is clearly part of it. Games may also have rules that govern endings, which may be part and parcel of success in the game whether they are positions in the game or not. Since winning may be a function of what counts as losing (or conversely), and may also depend on how or whether a given game ends, the account has to be more complex. Here is a re-re-revision of Suits’s account: To play a game is to attempt to win, or at least not to lose, as defined by the game [lusory goal], which consists in achieving or avoiding a specific state of affairs that may or may not be a part of the game [prelusory goal]... *etc.*

Yet even this re-re-revision is not quite right. Many games allow not only for winning and losing, but for various kinds of outcome states: stalemate in chess counts as a draw, or getting the bronze medal in the hundred-metre dash. True enough. But in playing such games, it may be rational for a player, convinced he cannot win, to try nevertheless to force a draw or to try to get the bronze medal. On Suits’s account such a player is *prima facie* not playing the game at all, since she is not trying to win. On the re-re-revised account, such a player is avoiding losing, but we cannot make sense of what she is doing. If anything, she is like an irksome trifter: not trying to win, but to play while avoiding losing. Yet surely that is wrong. Such a player is still playing the game; she merely sets her sights on what she intends to accomplish in her playing, which need not be coming in first or second—third place will do.

The proper response, I think, is found in the discussion above. Drop talk of winning and losing as part of the lusory goal of a game, and replace it

²¹ This analysis is meant to replace Suits’s notion of an ‘open game’: “Games which have no inherent goal whose achievement ends the game: crossing a finish line, mating a king, and so on” (133).

with the generalized notion of *success* in a game. In different games players can succeed by winning (coming in first), not losing, getting the silver rather than the bronze medal, and so on. There will be as many ways to succeed as there are games. But for any given game, the outcomes should be ordered in terms of the degree of their success: winning is best, and the ‘best winning’ if there are several ways to win, all the way to not losing, with losing, or the ‘worst losing’ if there are several ways to lose, at the other end of the scale.²² We can then hold that a player is playing a game, *i. e.* has adopted the lusory attitude, if she tries to optimize her success in the game as best she can. This prevents her from being an irksome trifter and explains how she is still playing the game even if her sights are not set on winning.

Letting games be defined in terms of success rather than necessarily winning might seem to offer a foothold to those who want to allow House and other such pastimes to count as games. After all, those who play House do so successfully while they keep in character. Why not allow this kind of success to serve as the lusory goal? What could be wrong with that?

What is wrong is that ‘success’ as used here is neither so defined by the activity, nor can it logically be success. It is not defined by the activity of role-playing in House the way chess defines losing moves or Racing With the Sun defines winning. Nor can it be success at all. In order for something to count as success at φ , it has to be possible to engage in φ without succeeding; otherwise φ just is succeeding at φ , which is no part of the meaning of ‘success’. Hence playing House cannot count as succeeding at playing House, and so it cannot serve as its lusory goal.

If we permit multiple forms of success in a game, then we have to allow for multiple prelusory goals to match the many lusory goals now available to the player. Suits’s account can be modified in the obvious ways to allow for players who try to get second place, or to avoid losing, and so on.

The final re-re-re-revision of Suits’s account I shall offer here, then, is as follows: To play a game is to attempt to optimize success as defined by the game as best as possible [lusory goal], which consists in achieving or avoiding a specific state of affairs (which may or may not be a part of the game) corresponding to some form of success [prelusory goal]... *etc.*

The account is far more cluttered than it is in Suits. But it is the more interesting for it.

One benefit of the cluttered account is that it is easy to see how the theory of games outlined here can be linked with the general theory of

²² This is far too simple. The structure of outcome success should be at least a partial lattice at any given stage of the game, which would allow for strategic optimizing choices to be made in the course of play. Perhaps weaker requirements would suffice.

strategy that goes under the name of ‘game theory’ (as derived from Von Neumann and Morgenstern). In Suits the links are obscure. The burden of my argument, however, has been to insist that playing a game has to be understood as trying to succeed, broadly speaking, however the game defines success. Hence what it is to be a given game involves what it is to succeed at the game. That is to describe, at a very general level, a player’s strategy. Game theory, in its classical formulation, studies the logic of interdependent decision by concentrating on abstract formal representations of interaction.²³ Games in so-called ‘normal form’ abstract from the rules and the moves made, representing games purely in terms of the strategies available to the players and the results of a choice of strategies by the players; these are usually represented in a game matrix that shows the outcomes (the payoffs) for each player of the adoption of strategies by all the players. The situations modeled in this fashion apply to more than games as described in my cluttered account, since non-games may also involve strategies and their results, but game theory may be applied to genuine games, and often only trivial modifications are required. A moment’s thought should make the point obvious. How a game defines success is what determines the rational strategies a player ought to select at different stages of gameplay, since playing a game well is a matter of optimizing the success the player can expect. Game theory, then, can be a proper part of the theory of games. What it is to play a game is analytically tied to playing it well; if not, we could not explain why triflers ruin games (45–46). The reason is easily stated. To play a game is to try to succeed, but triflers turn games into mere pastimes: they do not try to succeed but merely trifle with the other players, or metaphorically with the game itself. But if *trying to succeed* means *playing well*, the link to game theory is clear.

I close by returning to the distinction between games and pastimes. Games are, more or less, pastimes which afford the possibility of winning or losing. Recognizing that lusory goals are essential to games has allowed us to disentangle them from pastimes. While games may pass the time, they have their internal aims and ends—above all, winning, or more generally success. That is what makes them worthy of interest for their own sake, and why they are a worthwhile philosophical subject for investigation.

²³ Game theory has been developed with three distinct formal representations of games, at distinct levels of abstraction; each representation is useful for the study of some features of interdependent decision, though not others: games in extensive form (also known as the game-tree); games in normal form; games in characteristic form. See van Benthem [2014] for an attempt to combine the logic of games with logic, a significant step in incorporating game theory.

Bibliography

- van Benthem [2014]. Johan van Benthem, *Logic in Games*. The MIT Press 2014.
- Kolnai [1966]. Aurel Kolnai, “Games and Aims” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 66 (1966): 103–128.
- Suits [1978]. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. The University of Toronto Press 1978.