

## GAMES AND PASTIMES\*

Playing a game, Bernard Suits memorably declares, is to engage in “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (41).<sup>1</sup> This slogan encapsulates his longer and more exact account, which runs as follows (*ibid.*; his technical terminology is in square brackets):

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusive goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour 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. Nevertheless, 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 no part of his account of playing games. As a result, he describes not games but part of the broader category of *pastimes*: purposeful rule-governed activities engaged in for their own sake.<sup>2</sup> All games are pastimes, but not conversely; we can, and often do, simply pass the time in structured activities that are not quite games, though they may share features with games. (Pastimes have a family resemblance to 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.<sup>3</sup> This simple point has a wealth of

\* Presented at the Canadian Philosophical Association meetings at the University of Western Ontario, 30 May 2005. Thanks to Stephan Blatti for many conversations about games over the years. This paper is dedicated with respect and admiration to Bernard Suits.

<sup>1</sup> References and citations are taken from Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (University of Toronto Press 1978).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘pastime’ needs no apologies, but I will note that Suits uses it in this very sense at the beginning of his discussion of make-believe activities (90).

<sup>3</sup> There need not be both winners and losers; see the discussion below. Note also that there are winners and losers in activities that are not pastimes, such as warfare, but this does not make such activities games. The restriction to pastimes (as Suits has defined them) is necessary.

surprising consequences, as we shall see. But first I must convince you that Suits has left winners and losers out of his account.

Here is an argument for that conclusion: Inspect the account 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, they are not part of his account.

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

The mere fact that ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ do not appear in the account of games does not show that they aren’t covered by it. Suits clearly takes himself to have included winning (and by implication losing) right at the start, when on the way 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) 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. Suits recasts this as 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. Or so the argument runs.

In reply, we may insist on taking Suits at his word, in particular his first words: “there must be an end which is *distinct from winning*” (my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, trying to bring about that end in accordance with

<sup>4</sup> Suits repeats this claim from an earlier example, “there is an end in chess analytically distinct from winning” (33). He further expands it in his explanation of the prelusory goal: “. . . it can be described before, or independently of, any game of which it may be, or come to be, a part. In contrast, winning 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).

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 might count as winning in a game, and bringing it about in the appropriate way might count as trying to win that game, but they need not count in those ways, and regardless of whether they are so counted they are what they are independently of whatever status they may have in a game. So too the details of the prelusory goal, lusory means, constitutive rules, and lusory attitude make no essential mention of winning or losing, only of the states of affairs, permissible means, rule-governed actions, and ends for the sake of which the agent acts, no matter what their status in a game might be.

Of course, 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.” In this sense, ‘winning’ is no more than achieving a specific state of affairs in accordance with the rules, as described. It is an open question whether the activity includes anything it recognizes as a winning move, and hence an open question whether the activity is, properly speaking, a game. Since we are interested in games, we should try to close the open questions rather than merely adopt the proposed stipulation.

Despite his use of the term, then, winning (and so losing) is no part of Suits’s account. Just as well. Otherwise anything Suits identifies as a 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:<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>5</sup> The prelusory goal of games of make-believe is to maintain a reciprocal system of dramatic roles (135–136); ‘winning’ at House is therefore being able to keep the pretense alive. Yet this is no more than to play House itself, so that playing at all counts as ‘winning’. Surely it is better not to speak of winning at all, or only of ‘stipulative winning’ in Suits’s sense, in such cases.

and losers, as according to Suits they must, should give us pause.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion, again, is that winning and losing should not be understood as part of Suits's account.

Diagnosing the illness prescribes the cure: Modify the account to incorporate winning and losing.<sup>7</sup> This is more complicated than it appears. Here is a first shot: To play a game is to attempt to win as defined by the game [lusory goal], which consists in 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.

Is it overly fastidious to insist on this addition? 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). Any alteration in the goals with which an agent acts changes the character of her activity. To insist that playing a game requires the agent 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. It is the very feature that distinguishes mere pastimes from games. An example may help.

Suits describes a pastime he calls '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 is no game. (If you do not share this intuition I abandon you to a fun-filled world of such 'games' as Counting Holes in the Ceiling, Channel Roulette, and, my favourite, Following the Stranger—all pastimes, none games.) Suits argues that Taking the Long Way Home is not a game because the means it prescribes are not, properly 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 ineffi-

<sup>6</sup> One might think Suits is right about games but wrong about make-believe activities being games, in which case the implausibility of there being winners and losers in playing House tells not against his analysis of games but against the claim that make-believe activities are games. I think Suits is wrong on both counts, as the arguments here try to demonstrate.

<sup>7</sup> It would be possible, though perverse, to draw the moral that winning and losing is merely an accidental feature of (some) games, that all games are identifiable as games without reference to the fact that they are meant to be won; players would be 'triflers' as Suits understands the term (45–46), and playing a game to win no part of what makes the game a game.

cient in this technical sense (54), for his time and his shoe leather might be relatively abundant for him (55). Thus far Suits seems bang in the gold. Not so his 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

What would make Taking The Long Way Home more than a mere pastime is for Smith 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

<sup>8</sup> 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.

be read off his mere behaviour. Hence the addition that Smith is trying to win, that he is pursuing a lusory goal as well as a prelusory goal.

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, 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.

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 it is not a game.<sup>9</sup> 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), Catch has no lusory goal. Indeed, it may not have the requisite inefficiency: time, for a mere pastime, is not a scarce resource. (Catch is an inefficient way of getting a ball into someone else’s hands, but that is part of the prelusory goal and hence not the relevant kind of inefficiency.) Besides, keeping the ball in play isn’t even a plausible candidate for the prelusory goal of Catch, since, according to Suits, managing to keep the ball in play would count as ‘winning’—in which case playing Catch at all is tantamount to ‘winning’ at Catch, and this is surely mistaken. We are tempted to think 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 Catch as a pastime it includes picking up dropped balls and carrying on, in Catch as a

<sup>9</sup> 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).

game it means not dropping the ball.) But in its natural condition Catch is a pastime rather than a game.

What Suits calls “games of make-believe,” such as House, or Cops and Robbers, are strictly analogous to Catch. Hence they are pastimes rather than games. The point of House, and all these activities, is the continued furtherance of the role-playing they involve, much as the point of Catch is to keep on playing Catch—though this is in each case trivial.<sup>10</sup> Again, like Catch, House has neither winners nor losers, and in theory can be played indefinitely.<sup>11</sup> There is no lusory goal to House. In short, House and its ilk are pastimes, like Catch, rather than games.<sup>12</sup> Hence it is a virtue of the revised account of games that such make-believe activities do not qualify as games.

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 nontrivial independent 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 anyway, 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.*

There are more complexities in store. To wax aristotelian, 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, such as matches ending in a tie, chess games ending in stalemate, and so on. (Such activities

<sup>10</sup> Suits is led astray by the role-based (rather than goal-based) character of make-believe activities: he takes the continuation of role-playing to be a contentful prelusory goal, rather than seeing it as the trivially thin redescription of the activity it really is. There is nothing special about games and role-playing: online RPGs run the gamut from genuine games, on a par with Monopoly, to fictional simulations reminiscent of House.

<sup>11</sup> Suits calls games that can be played indefinitely ‘open’. More on such games shortly.

<sup>12</sup> We could make House into a game, as we did Catch: 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.

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—Smith and Jones may get home via the longer way before the Sun sets, whereas Janofsky and Garfinkel don't. In this case the players are not competing with one another, though each is racing the Sun. Indeed, Taking The Long Way Home can be played by any number, even by one person alone. Now 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 perfectly competitive; multiplayer games not permitting all players to win are imperfectly competitive. Not all games are competitive, of course.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 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 prelusory 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 a player aims to win

<sup>13</sup> Winning and losing do not necessitate competition, as Solitaire (or any single-player game) proves. Indeed, multiplayer games may be cooperative, so that one player's winning makes it more likely that another player is also able to win. Working out when cooperative games generate cooperation among players is a mathematical exercise left to the reader.

<sup>14</sup> This is why competitive games were defined solely in terms of winning. In a game that defines only winning, it is natural to take *losing* as *failing to win*. Perhaps. 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.

if possible, force a stalemate otherwise, and avoid losing.

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; winning is defined as having the highest score when the game ends: soccer, football, basketball.<sup>15</sup> In these games there are no winning, losing, or ending moves; the games end and a scoring system is used to determine the winners and losers. The lusory goal is, as always, to win. 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 winning essentially depends on ending, which 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; winning must be—otherwise we have a mere pastime rather than a game.<sup>16</sup> A proper account of games, it seems, must describe winning, and therefore must be general enough to incorporate losing and ending if they are defined in the game.

Take stock. I have argued against Suits that what it is to play a game must refer to winning the game, that the player must intend to succeed in the game’s terms to be counted as playing the game at all. Yet *winning* has turned out to be itself a complex notion, perhaps dependent on *losing* or on *ending* in a given game. Hence a re-re-revision of Suits’s account might go something like this: To play a game is to attempt to win rather than lose as

<sup>15</sup> Baseball is a hybrid. 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). Boxing may go for a fixed number of rounds but there is also a game-winning and game-ending move (the knockout). All sorts of combination are possible.

<sup>16</sup> 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).

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.* 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 strategy that goes under the name of ‘game theory’ (as derived from Von Neumann and Morgenstern). The burden of my argument has been to insist that playing a game has to be understood as trying to win, broadly speaking, however the game defines winning. Hence what it is to be a given game involves what it is to win the game, and perhaps what it is to lose, and again perhaps with a view to what it is to end the game. Players therefore try to win and not to lose with an eye to the game’s end. 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 modelled in this fashion apply to more than games as described here, 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.

Take the classical Prisoner’s Dilemma. Two prisoners suspected of jointly committing a crime are put into separate cells; if both confess each will be sentenced to three years in prison, if one but not the other confesses the confessor gets one year but the non-confessor four, and if neither confess they are convicted on a lesser charge and each gets two years. The game matrix is symmetrical and lists as outcomes the length of the prison sentences, under the two strategies each prisoner has available, namely **C** (confess) and **D** (don’t confess):

|          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|
|          | <b>C</b> | <b>D</b> |
| <b>C</b> | (3,3)    | (1,4)    |
| <b>D</b> | (4,1)    | (2,2)    |

<sup>17</sup> 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.

There is a unique Nash equilibrium:  $(\mathbf{C}, \mathbf{C})$ . Unfortunately, this equilibrium is worse than  $(\mathbf{D}, \mathbf{D})$ . The problem is that while there are gains from cooperation each player has an incentive to defect. (Rationality and optimality come apart.) Think of the outcomes as scores; define winning as having the lowest possible score, losing as having a higher score than the other player. Prisoner's Dilemma then looks very much like a game each player tries not to lose, though in so doing cannot manage to win.<sup>18</sup> Questions about interdependent strategies among players are clearly tied to what it is to win, since the strategies are, after all, designed to help the player win the game, whatever that may mean in context.

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 win, but triflers turn games into mere pastimes: they do not try to win but merely trifle with the other players, or metaphorically with the game itself. But if *trying to win* 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 with 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. That is what makes them worthy of interest for their own sake, and why they are a worthwhile philosophical subject for investigation.

<sup>18</sup> Whether Prisoner's Dilemma is a genuine game I leave open. Likely it is not, since the players (prisoners) are not voluntarily choosing among inefficient means to some goal their so choosing makes possible. But it is a simple matter to imagine another story that would have the same game matrix and qualify as a genuine game. I leave this as an exercise for the reader.