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Games are not cooperative

The first order of business is to demonstrate how and why games – and, most particularly, game rules – are *paradoxical*. Fortunately, Bernard Suits (1978), who has offered the clearest and most pointed definition of games and game rules available, has also offered a flawed set of conclusions regarding the non-paradoxy of games. This provides an excellent opportunity for one-stop shopping: to reiterate Suits' emphasis of the importance of game rules and, simultaneously, to repudiate his disallowance of game paradox in favor of non-paradoxical and cooperative gameplay.

Gameplay is distinguished from free play by game rules. Suits, a Canadian philosopher, constructed a well-thought-out definition of gameplay emphasizing the influence of game rules that, since its publication in his 1978 monograph *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*, has become increasingly influential.

> To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (1978, pp. 48–49)

This definition establishes game rules as prohibitive: "rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means." Golf, for instance, prohibits placing golf balls in golf holes by hand – which would be more efficient than following the rules of golf to do so. Game rules also have another, very peculiar quality: they must be accepted "just because they make possible such [game-playing] activity."

Accepting the rules of gameplay depends on adopting what Suits calls a *lusory attitude*: "the lusory attitude is the element which unifies the other elements into a single formula which successfully states the necessary and sufficient conditions for any activity to be an instance of game playing" (1978, p. 50). As a whole, this is an essentialist definition of gameplay and has been criticized in the past along non-essentialist lines – see, for instance, McBride (1979). However, I will not question Suits' essentialism here (and I will tend to support it in later chapters). Nor am I immediately concerned, as others – such as Meier (1988) – have been, with distinguishing what Suits calls games from what others call sport. (I will take this up later as well.) My first concern is with the implications of Suits' definition of game rules and how these rules affect the assignation of values and meanings during game play.

1.1. The oppositions of play

Whatever its flaws, Suits' definition has proven over time more influential and substantive than the great majority of its alternatives. And yet, despite this popularity, there is a component of gameplay, important elsewhere, that is given relatively short shrift in Suits' definition. This is the component of opposition (or, in its most severe form, *paradox*).

Two of the founding fathers of contemporary play studies, Johann Huizinga and Roger Caillois, assign a great deal more importance to oppositional play in their definitions of games and play than does Suits. Caillois (1961) gives oppositional play its own separate generic class – *agon* – and then, in recursive fashion, describes further classes of games and play – *alea* and *mimicry* – in opposition to agon. The sociologist Huizinga equally emphasizes oppositional play, drawing inspiration from the ancients: "The agon in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play" (1955, p. 31).

In a particularly thematic example of the theoretical significance of playful opposition, Gregory Bateson (1972) has offered play as a communication process: a meta-communicative

act signaling "This is play" (or, equally, "This is in opposition to that which is not play"). This notion extends the formalities of oppositional play to the formalities of *referencing* that play. For, without the employ of reference and representation within Bateson's notion – most especially without self-reference – this meta-communication of play is not possible.

Commonly, game rules serve both to reference and to adjudicate opposition during gameplay. This opposition includes competition among players, but also includes a similar sort of opposition between game players and game rules.

Suits acknowledges this and provides his lusory attitude to resolve it. Suits' lusory attitude adjudicates – and subordinates – all rules-determined oppositions during gameplay. Only games, according to Suits, are informed and set apart by an attitude of this sort. Then, as a consequence of this lusory attitude, according to Suits, games become most fundamentally *not* oppositional. Rather, games are most fundamentally *cooperative*.

And, of course, in many respects, gameplay is inarguably cooperative. Just as Suits maintains, in order for gameplay to function uniquely as gameplay, all game players must mutually accept the game's prohibitive rules. This is a universal act of cooperation required of all game players. Yet it is also an act of cooperation among *opponents*: an odd sort of cooperation that requires an odd sort of attitude to resolve it.

Suits' lusory attitude is so odd, in fact, that some have found it inexplicable, and claim that gameplay is more accurately described by what it is not than by what it is. Kolnai makes this claim directly and explicitly: "Games in the classic sense … exhibit a basic feature which cannot but puzzle us: a true paradoxy … In other words, the players must first agree amicably as partners to have a game of chess in order that each may endeavor to defeat the other" (1966, pp. 103–104). Note that Kolnai's view is not based merely on the presence of opposition within games, but more fundamentally on the juxtaposition of competition and collaboration within the broader game context – how these are *referenced* during gameplay.

> [T]he indissoluble double purposiveness of playing chess in
> absolute concord for the common pleasure of it and each player
> in chess aiming at nothing but defeating the other, destroying
> his power and foiling his purpose is what to me seems to exhibit
> in boldest outline the odd volitional posture I have ventured to
> call the paradoxy of Game. (1966, p. 105)

In contrast, Suits takes the position that, in order for games
to exhibit true paradoxy, there must be a true paradox involved.
And, while the juxtaposition of competition and collaboration
within games is admittedly oppositional, it does not elevate
to "an inescapable contradiction" (Suits, 1969, p. 316).

While acknowledging a collaboration–competition schism
within games – Suits calls these two "cooperative" and
"antagonistic" – Suits maintains that Kolnai assigns too much
significance to the competitive and the oppositional, which,
according to Suits, are muted by the rules of the game and,
most significantly, by the game player's lusory attitude:

> Thus, if a player were to aim at both obeying the rules (in order
> to play the game) and at breaking the rules (in order to achieve
> a quasi-victory, or perhaps the cash prize), we would recognize
> this as a genuine conflict between cooperation and antagonism
> to the other player. But although this might be called a genuine
> paradox – the Paradox of the Schizophrenic Cheater, perhaps
> – one would not want to identify it as the odd volitional posture
> characteristic of games … games do not require us to adopt
> conflicting intentions, but simply to *intend* conflict. [emphasis
> added] (1969, pp. 317–318)

While the "intention" of game rules may well be problematic,
the voluntary acceptance of those rules assures an absence
of conflict among game players. Within the grip of a lusory
attitude, game players merely "intend" conflict insofar as
their play only *references* conflict; and, correspondingly, any
oppositional relationship among game players – or between
game players and game rules – can only be said to *mimic*
opposition.

This notion of Suits is best based on a notion of *formal*
mimicry, or one that is not dependent on any further use to
which that mimicry might be put. This then enables us to

distinguish mimicry of this formal, game-based sort from, other sorts – e.g. plagiarism and satire.

For, while a plagiarism of some object may be said to be "imitative" of its object of thievery, and while a satire may equally be said to be "imitative" of its object of ridicule, a more fundamentally "imitative" form need not be so intentional, nor so purposeful, nor so value-dependent as these non-game-based sorts. Indeed, the disassociation of imitative forms within games from any external-to-the-game values and meanings seems a critical property of the game's formal mimicry and, correspondingly, the lusory attitude required by the game.

Thus, the positions taken by Suits and Kolnai on oppositions within games are sharply divided. Suits claims that cooperation and conflict exist in a master–slave relationship with the goal of playing the game – cooperation – being the master. Kolnai claims these exist in a dialectic, irresolvable and inexplicable. Suits would clarify what games ultimately are – and call this cooperative; Kolnai would rather focus on what games are not – and call this *not-ness* paradox.

I will side here with Kolnai.

1.2. The paradoxy of a lusory attitude

Let's set slightly firmer ground for a discussion of a Kolnai-like claim of paradoxical gameplay: Paradox must not result merely from the presence of *O* and *Not-O*, but rather from their simultaneous assertion. That is, paradox requires a particular form in which *O* and *Not-O* must coexist. Therein, this form must somehow reference *O* and *Not-O*. Most commonly, referential forms of this kind achieve paradox through recursive reference (i.e. through *self-reference*).

The prototypical example of such a paradoxical form is the well-known liar's paradox: "This sentence is false." It is useful to note within this sentence the two characteristics previously mentioned, along with a further and necessary third. There is reference within this sentence; there is self-reference within this sentence; and there is also, within this self-reference, self-denial. (Thus, a formally similar sentence such as "This

sentence is true," which includes both reference and self-reference, neither includes self-denial nor results in paradox.)

With this brief shopping list for paradox, let's again review Suits' opposition to paradox and his resolution of it with a lusory attitude. Suits describes a lusory attitude as that adopted by the game player who accepts the rules of the game "just because" it makes playing the game possible. Suits explains "just because" to mean this: "R [a lusory attitude] is always a reason for A [playing a game], and there need be no other reason for A [playing a game]" (1978, p. 131).

The best we might be able to make of this is that, for Suits, a lusory attitude references the rules of the game in a particular way: one that allows for cooperative game-playing. And, since the rules of the game are, for Suits, rules that "prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means," then a lusory attitude must somehow entail a *semiotic* distinction between more and less efficient means. That is, this lusory attitude must differentiate between one reference to a means of achieving goals (a more efficient, non-lusory means) and another (a less efficient, lusory means).

And each of these must be imitative – a mimicry of sorts – of the other.

For instance, to place a golf ball in a golf hole is trivial but for arbitrary restrictions imposed by the rules of golf. Yet the rules of golf are not arbitrarily derived from human behavior *in toto*, but rather from the comparatively narrow set of human behavior that results in placing a ball in a hole. In fact, we can identify definitional characteristics of this particular set – human, object-to-be-placed, place – that are identical for all such placing-an-object-somewhere sets. In this sense, then, each of these placing-an-object-somewhere sets of human behavior, efficacious or otherwise, is "imitative" of all others.

If so, then "less efficient" means is necessarily in some way imitative of "more efficient" means (and vice versa). Given the prohibitions of game rules, in fact, a less efficient means of achieving game goals is simultaneously the *most* efficient means – the *only* rules-determined means – of achieving game goals during gameplay. And *any* means of achieving game

goals during gameplay necessarily mimics means of achieving goals, more broadly considered, elsewhere.

These sorts of references seem vital to what Suits calls a lusory attitude. If so, then we can call this lusory attitude a *semiotic system*, in which gameplay references similarities and differences and assigns (rule-based) values and meanings to these. And this lusory attitude, as a *human* semiotic system, also necessarily references – mimics in some way – human semiotic systems elsewhere.

But, strangely, in order to maintain games as non-paradoxical and cooperative, Suits insists that a lusory attitude does not most fundamentally consist of "mimetic components."

> My view is that while many games undoubtedly contain mimicry, and ever are appealing because they contain mimicry, it cannot be their mimetic component which makes them games. (1978, p. 120)

Thus, on one hand, Suits claims that a lusory attitude defines and is necessary for games and game-playing, yet, on the other hand, he claims that mimicry does not define nor is necessary for games and game-playing.

How can a lusory attitude not be, in some essential way, mimetic?

Suits readily admits his expulsion of mimicry from games is a "heterodox" (1978, p. 120) view, but does not allow that denying the necessity of the mimetic within games – and therein failing to acknowledge the referential and semiotic properties of a properly functioning lusory attitude – might be fatal to his understanding of games and gameplay as cooperative.

This potential fatality turns on the difference Suits draws between the lusory and the mimetic – and on a parallel difference between the *adoption* of a lusory attitude and the *denial* of a non-lusory attitude. At first glance these two – asserting what is, and denying what is not – seem equivalent in consequence. But they are not at all equivalent in consequence if the lusory and the mimetic are more similar than Suits suspects.

1.3. The metaphysics of play

Suits' – and similar – positions imply that a player's lusory attitude is not a base state; it is a state imposed upon the otherwise normal and conventional (i.e. a non-game) state. But what exactly makes play and this state of the lusory an *alternative* state?

Why is this lusory attitude not our *primary* state?

For instance, it could be argued (as indirect realists and epistemological dualists might) that most normally and conventionally we view the world through the unavoidable lenses of representationalism. And it is only during mimicry of and reference to this representationalism – e.g. during make-believe and gameplay – that we become aware of the vagaries of our situation.

There is even some empirical evidence to support this radical claim that the base state of human experience is more playful and lusory – accepting rules of X just because it makes X possible – than serious and non-lusory. For instance, there is increasing knowledge of the mechanisms of the human body that manipulate our self-awareness and the references through which we (i.e. our consciousness) are made aware of our surroundings. Further, this knowledge can be used to control and distort, to point references to our legs and arms somewhere other than where our legs and arms actually are, to create false awareness of multiple appendages and out-of-body experiences (see Blanke & Metzinger, 2009; Guterstam, Petkova, & Ehrsson, 2011). If, as this empirical research implies, there are alternative rules to those that govern our consciousness and self-awareness, then must we not somehow "accept" those conventional rules governing our consciousness and self-awareness *just because?*

Nor is there lack of anecdotal evidence for the primacy of a lusory attitude. For is not a state of play considered as natural and as common – indeed, more common – than any other? Does not society find it necessary – even compulsory – to impose strictures and penalties in order to prevent our workaday descent into the lusory? And yet, even in the face of these impositions, that descent occurs.

For those of us in the playful grip of the lusory, is there any sense of the alien or the foreign? The lusory attitude of the human game player need not be, after all, like our written languages, learned only by the dedicated and practiced only by the skilled. A lusory attitude seems rather to billow up naturally from within rather than, like literacy or manners, to be donned only upon celebratory occasions as some gaudy costume to deceive dim-witted suitors.

If Suits' lusory attitude were indeed a base state of human experience, then the distinctions he draws between cooperation and conflict would not dissolve, but these two opposites would become equally fabrications, partial and incomplete references to a more fundamental – more paradoxical – base state. And Suits' notion of rules as prohibitive – establishing arbitrary obstacles for game-related tasks – would be turned on its head. Game rules would serve not to restrict and prohibit game player behavior so much as to *restore* human behavior to its original lusory state, a state otherwise distorted by social and cultural mores that restrict and distort it.

If the lusory were our primary and natural state, then it would be the denial of the non-lusory that would return us to this natural state, rather than the sleight of hand Suits would employ to make us believe a lusory attitude allows us to temporarily adopt something we permanently possess.

1.4. The semiotics of play

In any case, whether primary or secondary to its alternatives, gameplay takes place within a unique semiotic system that references things as something other than what those things are outside of gameplay. These things include competition and cooperation – and games themselves. Within this peculiar semiotic system, any definition of what it means "to play a game" becomes formally similar to "to reference a representation."

To reference a representation during gameplay is to quickly become enmeshed in recursion and self-reference (as games frequently do). Cooperation and conflict are then most meaningfully defined only by game players during gameplay. In such a context, Suits is willing to admit something of

paradox, just as Kolnai is willing to admit something of cooperation.

Suits allows, under certain conditions, paradox to occur during gameplay. He offers examples: "The Paradox of the Schizophrenic Cheater" (1969, p. 318) and "The Paradox of Infinite Benignity" (1969, p. 319) and "The Paradox of the Unbeatable Loser" (1969, p. 321). But, according to Suits, these result either from poorly constructed games or from no games at all. The well-constructed game balances (and therein resolves) any falsely paradoxical stance of the game player – similar to how the interior designer might aesthetically balance a client's preference for mauve and orange.

But, although Suits may be optimistic in granting the constructor of games (or, in parallel, the designer of kitchens) this talent of reconciliation, I am not. The successful resolution of the game player's "odd volitional posture" in games – like the successful arrangement of mauve and orange kitchen fixtures – is judged in the eyes of the beholders. And, even if we agree to grant great powers of reconciliation to those who construct and design, the eye of the beholder is not equally subject to our agreements. The human eye obstinately rebels against the legibility of mauve fonts on orange papers; and human cognition – particularly during the human experience of play – may likewise rebel against the resolution of paradox in games.

In order to subordinate paradox within more orderly and cooperative gameplay, Suits denies any relationship between paradox and a lusory attitude, between make-believe as a game and a game as make-believe. He makes nothing of any formal similarities between referential (mimetic) role-play and oppositional (antagonistic) gameplay. Yet, in order to justify this position, Suits imposes a curiously paradoxical interpretation of the oppositional in games.

Admittedly, Suits' position rejecting an essential paradoxy of games is more nuanced and detailed than Kolnai's position supporting it. For instance, Suits spends considerable effort in *The grasshopper* explicating "make-believe" as a type of impersonation (or *role-play*).

> Make-believe, I suggest, is a kind of impersonation. But whereas what might be called serious impersonators play roles so that they might be taken for the object of impersonation, in make-believe the performers take a subject of impersonation so that they can be playing the roles such impersonation requires. (1978, p. 93)

Suits positions make-believe counter to more mundane human activities, yet does not consider the peculiar *references* of make-believe – its semiotic system – vital to an understanding of game rules and gameplay. Suits steadfastly distinguishes make-believe (as a form of *role*-play) from gameplay (as a form of *rules* play).

This distinction between gameplay and role-play emphasizes Suits' separate understanding of gameplay and play more generally. As a consequence, there is some potential misdirection, at least from Suits' point of view, in referencing *gameplay*, about which Suits writes persuasively and influentially, and referencing play more generally, about which Suits writes less.

Suits (1977) certainly draws a very clear distinction – a logical independence – between gameplay and play more generally. However – as advanced by Morgan (2008) and repeated by Ryall (2011) – this distinction seems "odd."

Most commonly, perhaps, the distinction between gameplay and play more generally is not held to be that between different genera, nor between different species, nor even between different breeds – such as, for instance, the difference between poodles and chihuahuas. This difference is held to be more that between the dog on and off the leash. And, as such, gameplay is most commonly understood as a restrained form of play more generally – including make-believe and role-play.

To clarify Suits' contortions to resolve these matters, let's examine more closely one of the false paradoxes he offers in support of his position: The Paradox of the Schizophrenic Cheater. According to Suits, this paradox results from "both obeying the rules (in order to play the game) and … breaking the rules (in order to achieve a quasi-victory)" (1969, p. 317). Yet this is no paradox of gameplay, according to Suits, because

this sort of play does not apply to gameplay. The Schizophrenic Cheater is not playing the game properly: She is cheating.

And, certainly, as Suits claims, a "quasi-victory" is not properly a victory.

Likewise, cheating can never result in winning a game. In fact, "winning" a game is never necessarily *winning* a game – or, at least, winning a game in one semiotic sense does not necessarily entail winning a game in some more relevant and immediate, game-rules-determined semiotic sense. Winning in this latter sense is something close – perhaps identical – to playing the game properly. Even "losing" the game does not preclude winning in this latter sense.

> failing to win the game by virtue of losing it implies an achievement, in the sense that the activity in question – playing the game – has been successfully, even though not victoriously, complete. (Suits, 1969, p. 321)

This is the crux of Suits' definition of games and gameplay (and why his definition remains a valuable one): *Playing the game is all*. And playing the game must then adopt a particular sort of semiosis – a unique semiotic system – consistent across all playings of all games. We know this is a consistent system because all those who adopt a lusory attitude do so in order to reference all game objects and processes – such as *winning* the game and *losing* the game – equally, according to the same lusory principle.

Let's call this semiotic system L.

"Winning" the game within some other semiotic system may mean accomplishing the game's victory conditions; within L, however, *winning* the game means something else. Within some other semiotic system, "losing" the game may mean failing to accomplish the game's victory conditions; within L, however, *losing* the game means something else. And so on.

Consistently, within L, things reference something other than what those things reference elsewhere – yet, simultaneously, they remain imitative of those things. Within L, then, we have an image of gameplay as a sort of topsy-turviness: both what is and what is not. And this seems to make some

sense, because, yes, in gameplay, things are both strange and familiar.

But Suits and others, in their attempt to make games cooperative – and, even more than this, *definitively* cooperative – do not accept the full implications of this topsy-turviness.

A "victory" might reference only a quasi-victory within L. But, if so, why might not L be equally capable of referencing a "quasi-victory" as a victory? Indeed, from the point of view of someone governed by some other, non-L semiotic system, the reference to victories within L – *mating-the-king* and *completing-the-contract* and all other tasks similarly accomplished by properly playing the game – are only quasi-victories, which is to say they are not victories at all. Why then are these flights of fancy, these playful references, victories in *any* sense? These "victories" are, after all, only accomplished within L, only within the context of playing a game.

Suits would like us to believe that L elevates playing the game to such status that it makes L immune to the paradox of players who cooperate in order to compete. But this immunity is solely an artifact of the peculiar and contorted semiotic system of L. Yes, within L, "paradoxes" can be quasi-paradoxes, as Suits suggests. However, equally within L, "quasi-paradoxes" can be paradoxes.

Nor is this simply a shell game. Within L, the paradox of playing a game is no illusion. It is as fundamental and as meaningful as all other meanings required of games and gameplay. Paradoxes of this game-playing sort are inseparable from games and gameplay being referential and evoking a lusory attitude that is both self-referencing and self-denying.

1.4.1. Games are referential

By this claim, I mean to collapse and reduce reference, representation, imitation, mimicry, and opposition – even antagony – into something like Spencer-Brown's (1972) elemental mark of distinction, and therein be able to say equally that games reference things, games represent things, game oppose things, games imitate things, and so forth. Each of these is made

possible by an elemental attitude of distinction – marking the difference between a game and a non-game – that we call a lusory attitude.

I do not consider this claim, in its broadest sense, extraordinary; I rather consider it obvious and uncontroversial. Yet Suits would apparently have a lusory attitude responsible for some of the above (marking the difference between a game and a non-game, for instance), and not others (not marking the difference between what is mimicry and what is not, or what is referential and what is not, for instance). And, in order to separate what he would have from what he wouldn't, Suits is forced to draw an awkward dichotomy between the lusory and the mimetic.

1.4.2. Games are self-referencing

This is very likely the root cause of the difference between Suits and Kolnai. Games appear paradoxical in form to Kolnai (and others), yet this paradoxical form is somehow resolved during the course of gameplay, as noted by Suits. Thus, Suits would capture the paradoxical within a game player's lusory attitude and therein deny the consequences of paradox.

And, indeed, this strategy would seem to remove the specter of paradox. Under such a scenario, the game seems paradoxical because the lusory attitude necessary to play the game *properly* seems paradoxical – most especially to those not properly under the influence of that attitude. Under the influence of this lusory attitude, however, wherein all game players properly play games, the otherwise odd volitional stance of game players is not so odd as it might appear.

But then we merely eliminate one paradox (that caused by simultaneous collaboration and competition during game play) with another: one based in self-reference. For the game player's lusory attitude is now both source and, simultaneously, resolution of paradox. It is as though Suits might claim that the liar's paradox – "This sentence is false" – is no longer a paradox once it has been written down and read aloud.

Certainly, Suits' lusory attitude can be used to resolve paradox within game play; but that lusory attitude must

reference itself in order to do so, and this resolution is then just as fragile as that which it purports to resolve.

1.4.3. Games are self-denying

Again, I mean to make this an obvious claim. Surely, games are, in some sense, "false." Thus, we commonly say we are "just playing a game" or, equally, "this game is not real." And we take these phrases to mean we are doing something other than what matters.

But this is merely a denial, within the game, of what is otherwise, outside the game, different; it is not simultaneously a denial of the game itself. Self-denial during gameplay results when, compelled by a lusory attitude, we play games just as though they were *true*. And, should we take the false truth constructed by a lusory attitude less seriously than that lusory attitude commands, then we are poor players – "spoilsports," Suits might call us.

Given a lusory attitude, then, we do not precisely assert "this game is a game" during gameplay. We rather assert "this game is *not* a game" – or, perhaps even more accurately, we *deny* "this game is a game." And it is in this sense that I mean to claim games are self-denying.

1.5. Summary

Suits' definition of games is persuasive, focusing our attention on game rules and how those rules are valued and assigned meaning by a game player's lusory attitude – both essential to games and gameplay. However, given this definition, denying that a lusory attitude functions as a semiotic system in reference to other semiotic systems – in *mimicry* of those other systems – is problematic.

It seems, at best, awkward to disassociate make-believe and mimicry from the lusory attitude necessary to play a game properly. More critically, however, aside from its awkwardness, by maintaining a distinction between the make-believe and the lusory, Suits denies his lusory attitude its most critical

and game-determining semiotic properties, including self-reference.

Suits' rejection of the simultaneous presence of collaboration and competition within games as paradox depends mightily on the conciliatory properties of the game player's lusory attitude. However, without its peculiar (and paradoxical) semiotic properties, it is not clear how Suits' lusory attitude can accomplish the task Suits sets it. And, with these semiotic properties – particularly self-reference – Suits' lusory attitude does not itself escape the charge of paradox.

For these reasons, Suits' definition – and all else that would be definitive about games and gameplay – is hoist on its own petard in denying the essential paradoxy of gameplay.