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Bernard Suits on Capacities: Games, Perfectionism, and Utopia

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Abstract

An essential and yet often neglected motivation of Bernard Suits' elevation of gameplay to the ideal of human existence is his account of *capacities* along perfectionist lines and the function of games in eliciting them. In his work Suits treats the expression of these capacities as implicitly good and the purest expression of the human *telos*. Although it is a possible interpretation to take Suits' utopian vision to mean that gameplay in his future utopia must consist of the logically inevitable replaying of activities we conduct in the present for instrumental reasons (playing games-by-default), because gameplay for Suits is identical with the expression of sets of capacities specifically elicited by game rules, it is much more likely that he intends utopian gameplay to be an endless series of carefully crafted opportunities for the elicitation of special capacities (playing games-by-design), and thus embody his ideal of existence. This article therefore provides a new lens for understanding both Suits' definitional work on gameplay, and its connection to his utopian vision in the last chapter of *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*.¹

Keywords

Bernard Suits; Thomas Hurka; perfectionism; capacities; game design; utopia

Suits and Hurka on Difficult Gameplay

Bernard Suits is a central figure in the field of the philosophy of sports chiefly due to his oft-invoked definition of gameplay, which reads as follows:

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 favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (Suits 2014, 43)

He also gives a more succinct, 'portable' version of the definition: 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.' (Suits 2014, 43) The 'obstacle' clause in the definition indicates that, for Suits, a player must encounter some minimal level of *difficulty* in playing for something to count as a game: consequently, overcoming this difficulty means passing the test posed by the game, by achieving its prelusory goal. What games test for are certain capacities—the skills necessary for intralusory (in-game) success.

To find value in gameplay is to see value in the difficulty of overcoming unnecessary obstacles, as Thomas Hurka does, claiming that 'difficult activities are as such good' (Hurka 2006, 221), in no small part because difficulty is a precondition for the further widely accepted good of *achievement*. On Hurka's account, good (well-designed) games 'cannot be so difficult that no one can succeed at them, but also cannot lack all challenge: they must strike a balance between too much and too little difficulty.' (Hurka 2006, 221) Bad (poorly-designed) games, on the other hand, are bad because they can fail in two ways to test capacities: (1) 'punishing' games contain insurmountable obstacles in their design, and therefore give us *difficulty without*

achievement; and (2) 'trivial' games contain easily overcome obstacles in their design, and therefore give us (the appearance of) *achievement without difficulty*. Between these two extremes of punishing and trivial games, there is a Hurkan golden mean of *good* games, with an amount of difficulty suitable for the testing of human capacities, and thus producing achievement via gameplay.

Hurka is solely concerned with only this set of good games 'because they realize what seems like an internal goal of the design of games,' (Hurka 2006, 221) which is to say, they provide opportunities for testing—and in the case of achievements, realizing—players' capacities through appropriately difficult gameplay. For Suits, similarly, capacities play a motivational role: 'People play games so that they can realize in themselves capacities not realizable (or not readily so) in the pursuit of their ordinary activities.' (Suits 2007, 12) So good games test our capacities through the creation of unnecessary obstacles, and we seek out and play good games in order to have a venue for expressing and testing those capacities.

Suits makes a further claim that 'games generate new skills by erecting artificial constraints just so those constraints can be overcome.' (Suits 1988, 4) What he presumably means here is that some capacities can *only* be realized and tested in games—because there is no natural circumstance which calls for their expression—such as the capacity which sources skill in achieving a checkmate in chess. These capacities are necessarily ones we cannot know we have in advance of playing a given game; but to say that that they are 'generated' by the game rather than 'revealed' through gameplay is slightly misleading. To understand why this is so, we must define what we mean by the term 'capacity'.

Perfectionism and the Definition of 'Capacity'

Both Suits and Hurka operate from a perfectionist moral framework, traceable back to the Aristotelian ideas of *telos* (human purpose) and *eudaimonia* (human flourishing). The concept of 'capacity' plays a central role in this schema, for it is by realizing our capacities that we bring our existences in line with our purpose as a species and arrive at a state of flourishing. As Gwen Bradford explains: 'Knowledge, pleasure, achievement, loving relationships, and so on are valuable according to perfectionism because they are manifestations of special human features. Having these special features, and manifesting them, according to perfectionism, is having a good life. According to most perfectionist views, these features are certain *capacities* that are special to human beings. Developing these capacities to the most excellent degree possible is what perfectionism values.' (Bradford 2015, 114-115)

To simplify this picture, we might imagine that each capacity of a human being could be represented by a series of switches, each with a binary 'on' and 'off' position.² Let us picture that all human capacities could be fully represented by one hundred such switches for each individual person. The more switches that were in the 'on' position for any given person, the more fully realized that person would be, and the closer to the ideal of the good life that person could come. In terms of actualization, we could say it would be better to be a thirty-switcher than a ten-switcher, and much better to be an eighty-switcher than either of those. Again, we must assume in this example that—for Suits, at least—some switches would always remain in the 'off' position *unless* certain games are played, for he claims that 'if no one had ever used his

feet before the invention of foot racing, then foot racing would require the invention of running.’ (Suits 2014, 51) So gameplay for him either has the power to (a) create new human capacities as well as reveal pre-existing latent ones, or (b) only reveal latent capacities. Let us call (a) the *strong reading*, and (b) the *weak reading* of Suits on his relationship between capacities and gameplay. We will return to these divergent readings shortly after offering a definition of ‘capacity’. Suffice it to say for the moment that for Suits, the purpose of gameplay is to help us become more fully realized humans, by turning on certain types capacities that cannot be aroused in any other fashion.

For the purposes of the argument at hand, I take capacities to be latent abilities to do, experience, or become something, which can be unlocked by fitting circumstances and thereby *realized*. More formally: an agent A has a *capacity* to X if and only if under condition set α , A *can* X. A *realizes* that capacity if A *does* X under α . The relation is one between an agent and an act, where that act issues from the agent after being evoked by a catalysing circumstance of a fitting kind. Without a triggering circumstance, therefore, a capacity will never find expression: for example, in a world without fungi there cannot be any mycologists, although being a mycologist is clearly within the potential capacities of a human being. However, whereas we can witness acts (the realizations of capacities), we cannot witness capacities themselves: we must instead intuit (or, more often, retrodict) capacities from acts.

The preceding tentative account of capacities has been intentionally kept as metaphysically simple and transparent as possible, and it is my hope that this definition—wanting though it may be in some regards—will suffice to demonstrate what Suits means when he uses the term. Given what has been said so far, we can make a few further remarks about

capacities. First, if we accept that the realization of capacities is an essential feature of the good life, it becomes inconsistent to hold that metaphysical entities such as evil, bad, or negative capacities exist. If such capacities were possible, we ought to condemn, rather than praise, their realization. This is not to say, of course, that skills sourced from capacities cannot be put to evil ends—for they very frequently are, in fact, as Bradford points out in her discussion of evil achievements. (Bradford 2015, 21-24) It is just that, along perfectionist lines, we would want to assert that capacities (in their unrealized form) are *a priori* good.

Secondly, because the realization of human capacities is the *telos* of our species, we can reasonably expect that the experience of doing so would be enjoyable, meaningful, and good in itself for individual members of our species. The most robust range of our possible capacities is given (and limited) by our species, though it is presumably reduced in scope by the influences of culture, social strata, and peer group, as well as our individual limitations. However, just as we were able to previously compare hypothetical individuals in terms of degrees of capacity-realization, we could conceivably attempt a similar comparison between hypothetical cultures (or smaller groups). For instance, if the individuals that make up the population of culture C have 30% of their capacities realized on average at any given time, and the individuals that make up the population of culture D have only 10% of their capacities realized on average at any given time, then *ceteris paribus* we can non-controversially claim that culture C is better off than culture D in terms of its average rate of capacity realization across individuals.

Thirdly, by extension we can posit an ideal of a fully realized human as someone who is actively expressing all of their potential capacities. Without committing to a fixed number, we can say that the number of contingently realizable capacities will differ between individual

members of the same species, and that the more capacities that are being expressed on a regular basis, the more fully realized an individual would be. We can state these general maxims without definitively judging whether total (100%) capacity actualization in an individual—a full realization of all capacities at all times—is either a contingently unrealizable or conceptually impossible ideal, or whether such a state would be generally desirable (or even intelligible) from a non-ideal standpoint.³ Remaining agnostic on the extreme ideal case costs us nothing here.

Fourthly, we must acknowledge some epistemic issues in discussing capacities, for although we may attempt to enumerate the full range of possible human capacities, we cannot be confident that we have been utterly exhaustive. Nor, even in the case of capacities that are familiar to us and are generally acknowledged, can we glean precise percentiles of their realization in any given individual: the exact numbers, if such exist, are hidden from us. Thus, since the proportion of our individual capacities that are realized is an epistemically inaccessible percentile, we could not and would not know if and when we were to become fully realized agents.

Finally, we must make a distinction between at least two types of capacities: innate and learned. Regarding innate capacities, it seems that at least some very basic capacities are present from birth, such as the capacity to breathe. But can we fairly call a skill or ability that is always 'on' the expression of a capacity? For capacities must *prima facie* be at least potentially latent. Something that is always 'on'—like the ability to breathe oxygen—looks like it must count as something else; though perhaps if we are transported into an oxygen-free atmosphere (like deep space) without a breathing apparatus, it might make more intuitive sense to say in

that case that we do indeed have a *capacity* to breathe oxygen-rich gases, but *circumstances* do not allow for the realization of that capacity. Thus it appears that we can conclude that all living humans must have at least one or two of their metaphorical switches (representing innate capacities) in the ‘on’ position at any given time. Further: an entity which is not actively expressing any capacity at all would not appear to be a human being on this account.

Regarding learned capacities, we might wonder: is learning itself a capacity—perhaps even a capacity by way of which we can acquire other capacities? This recalls our previous question: can a capacity be *created*, or are they always present and merely *revealed*? The quick and dirty answer would be to say that a human being can only do what human beings *already* have the capacities to do (just as a tree cannot grow from an egg, nor a chicken from a nut). If new capacities could be *created* (as in the strong reading of Suits given above), this would require changing the ‘hardware’ of the human body and brain. This view of capacities might make sense from an intergenerational or transhumanist standpoint, with some finessing, as we will discuss below. However, standard accounts of perfectionism only advocate developing *human* capacities, not *superhuman* or *posthuman* ones. But if learning is simply a matter of *revealing* pre-existing capacities (as in the weak reading of Suits given above), then doing so requires nothing more extreme than changing the ‘software’ of our individual thoughts and habits, or perhaps our cultural outlook, which is well within the remit of perfectionist ideology.

Suits on Utopian Capacities and Utopian Gameplay

Recently, Suits' 'utopian vision' in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, his work on the form and nature of utopian existence, has also risen to relative prominence and critical analysis (McLaughlin 2008, Vossen 2016, Yorke 2017) despite the enduring central focus on his definition of games. However, his concept of 'capacities' in relation to the utopian thesis has to date received insufficient attention. In this section I will endeavor to draw these threads together.

In Suits' utopian thought experiment all human needs and wants are immediately met by telepathically-controlled supercomputers. Humanity has access to the logical equivalent of an infinite number of wish-granting magical lamps, each capable of granting infinite wishes. (Suits 2014, 182-183) So we must assume that if Suits' utopians want to modify their bodies, or even transfer their consciousnesses to other bodies, this is within the realm of possibility for them—physics goes on holiday. Thus radical changes to the human body itself may allow for the creation of new human capacities in utopia, in addition to those which could be facilitated by the introduction of novel sports equipment, which creates a hypothetical set of 'utopian sports' which would vary considerably from our contemporary sports: these are, arguably, Suits' famous 'sports and games unthought of today.' (Suits 2014, 194) This line of interpretation clearly favors the strong reading of Suits on capacities.

There is an aspirational dimension to our choice of games for Suits, for 'with the invention of games far removed from the pursuits of ordinary life, quite new capacities emerge, and hitherto unknown skills are developed.' (Suits 2007, 12) Pedalling, in other words, can be thought of as a capacity that had little opportunity for meaningful expression prior to the invention of the pedal; and we can imagine, by extension, that with the invention of new pieces

of sporting equipment, new parts of the body might become central to gameplay. Imagine, for instance, a new sport wherein a player's moves were controlled solely through the fine-tuned flexing of their back muscles via an electronic interface: this would valorize a human capacity that has had few other relevant arenas of expression up to this point.

Thus, when Suits writes of 'sports and games that will require for their exploitation—that is, for their mastery and enjoyment—as much energy as is expended today in serving the institutions of scarcity' (Suits 2014, 194) with regard to utopian games, what he is seemingly referring to is creating as-yet-undiscovered *new capacities* expressed in new forms of gameplay, and thus a more fully realized kind of human being that would be playing them: a utopian. I have suggested elsewhere that such utopians on a strong reading are unrelatable entities; they are, at best, a successor species, a placeholder for the beings who will play games in Suits' utopia, and that their values and mode of existence are necessarily obscured from our understanding, hidden behind an unbridgeable cultural gap between us and them. (Yorke 2017)

I also acknowledged that this strong interpretation, while defensible in light of Suits' more hyperbolic statements, is perhaps not the most charitable or productive way to understand his utopian vision. The weak reading of capacities for Suits must be closer to what he intended. Schematically, Suits can be read as implying that games, as voluntary efforts to overcome unnecessary obstacles, provide the required circumstances for the expression of pre-existing latent capacities. Conceptually distinct games typically elicit different capacities by design, and a utopia of gameplay would need to be replete with games specially designed to promote human flourishing through the expression of as many of these capacities as possible (especially due to the fact that the instrumental pressures and demands which previously

provided the circumstances for their expression would be extinguished, via the advent of utopian material superabundance).

The ‘duty to design’ utopian games which Suits states we have (Suits 2014, 194) is a task to be completed in the present, to begin the work of establishing a utopian culture, and can be parsed in such a way as to fit with the weak reading on capacities. Let us call his argument for this duty the *utopian game design thesis*, which can be briefly summarized as follows: (1) Certain capacities can *only* be expressed via gameplay; (2) the expression of those game-exclusive capacities is essential to the project of realizing our best selves; (3) these capacities aren’t generally routinely being expressed in present gameplay (which may in part explain why many contemporary games have the low reputations they currently suffer from); but (4) these capacities should be being expressed via gameplay, because (5) we ought to try to become our best selves if such is possible; thus (6) we need to design a set of utopian games which correctly identify and elicit the expression of these crucial game-exclusive capacities. This aspirational model of game design fully employs the cultural technology of games and gameplay in a new way—not as a pastime, but as a means for individual (and ultimately cultural) transformation—the Suitsian formulation of *ludic alchemy*. The right kind of gameplay, for Suits, terraforms Earth into Utopia.

Objections to the Utopian Game Design Thesis

Against the weak reading of Suits on capacities and its relation to utopian gameplay, and specifically against the utopian game design thesis as laid out above, several axes of criticism

can be levied. It could be claimed that we simply don't know enough about the scope and nature of human capacities to be able design games adequate to the task of consistently uncovering or eliciting them. Alternately, it could be claimed that we don't know enough about the science or art of game design to be able to design games which are sufficiently compelling to realize the latent capacities that we do understand and non-controversially acknowledge we have. Perhaps most troublingly, there is an additional theoretical worry that if there is no essentially stable utopian body, then there can be no such thing as a utopian sport to be designed.

Counter to the first objection that we are insufficiently acquainted with human capacities to design games to elicit them, Suits argues that: 'Rules are the crux of games because it is the rules of any particular game that generate the skills appropriate to that game.' (Suits 1988, 5) In other words, for Suits we needn't worry about having an insufficient grasp of human capacities, because game designers can more or less retrodict these through good game design: if we can identify a skill, we can intuit a capacity it is sourced from. Jon Pike has recently written a nice *reductio ad absurdum* of this position, stating 'it is the skills that generate the rules, not the other way around. We have no rules to cover contests of unaided flying, and constructing some rules to cover such putative sports would not allow us to develop the skills to enact them. For unaided flying to be a sport, we do not need rules; we need wings.' (Pike 2018, 328) While this criticism does apply to the sloppy wording of Suits' formulation quoted above, I believe that the intention behind the text can still be rescued. For Suits obviously did not believe that a game rulebook would produce the miracle of unaided flight in human beings—but he did believe that what human capacities do exist would be developed, when and

where they were properly elicited, under the circumstances of gameplay. This seems to generally be the case in practice, at least where the game is good (well designed) in Hurka's sense. Pike's game, by comparison, is just bad, but not in the sense that it is punishing (too difficult) or trivial (too easy), but in the sense that it is contingently *impossible* and as such cannot even be attempted.⁴

Yet, even if contingently impossible games like Pike's sport of unaided flight might never get played, its ruleset might yet display the virtues of consistency and clarity, and sit on a shelf ready for use in the highly unlikely circumstance of a viable bird-human genetic hybrid being produced—and, in that odd hypothetical case, rules-appropriate skills would still have to be learned and developed by the game's participants. Indeed, the only class of games for which skills could *never* under any circumstances be developed in line with its ruleset would be conceptually impossible games—for instance, those that require their players to draw squared circles. In any other case, it seems like game designers could potentially work something out with regards to fitting their rulesets to those capacities which they have some reason to think exist (or at least *could* exist in a nearby possible world).

Game design is nevertheless somewhat philosophically undertheorized, which could leave Suits open to the second objection: that we do not understand the principles of game design well enough to reliably elicit human capacities with it. While it is true that philosophers have not yet produced a definitive and satisfactory answer to the question of exactly *what role* game design should have in producing human wellbeing, it will be evident from our preceding discussion that at least Suits and Hurka, among others, coordinate on the position that it *does* have a role to play.⁵ But even if they are correct, the question remains as to whether we ought

to regard game design as a hard science that we could hypothetically completely understand and eventually master, or as a soft art, whose forms and norms shift according to time, place, and custom.

From a Suitsian perspective, it seems we must treat game design like a science, for its task in his schema is to provide a universal source of entertainment for all utopians, protecting them from boredom-induced madness and thus vouchsafing the socio-political stability of his utopia. If anything, game design in this context looks like a modest expression of situationism, the psychological theory that certain environmental features can have an overriding influence on the moral actions of the agents inhabiting them. In line with Suits' utopian game design thesis, it appears that playing good games could conceivably *condition* us to be good people.

Thus on Suits' capacity model of gameplay, a science of game design could help utopians (and, arguably, pre-utopians like ourselves) become better people by providing greater and greater obstacles for them to overcome and thus unlocking greater and greater capacities. For if the definition of gameplay is identical with the expression of human capacities, then what is Suits' utopia of continuous, endless gameplay except an unending expression of the range of all latent human capacities? The *utopian game design thesis* thus stated fits with Suits' overall schema, but yields the odd result that designers of well-designed games are already *de facto* involved in a project of moral perfectionism, whether or not they are aware of it (and most, presumably, are not).

Arguably, the principles of game design are sufficiently developed to tell us roughly which kinds of games are adequate for testing human capacities and which are not, and to

what extent. Tic-tac-toe, for instance, only requires the understanding of one simple strategy in order to fully master it, so we can safely conclude that few or no important human capabilities are tested or unlocked in playing it. Slot machines are much worse, in that even less cognition and dexterity are required in their operation, and there is even less room for the exercise of player agency. But more complex games, which produce more intense and difficult challenges for their players, will correspondingly produce higher-value achievements via their gameplay—and thus better enable the realization of their players’ capacities. The more we develop our account of the theory and practice of how game design identifies, isolates, and elicits various capacities, the safer Suits looks to be from the criticism that our understanding of games is too primitive to reliably elicit capacities through erecting obstacles of properly-calibrated difficulty.

Difficulty is, however, agent-relative: what is hard (or even impossible) for me to achieve might be easy for you to achieve, and vice versa; so the game that you find trivial I may find to be punishing. In this way, intraludary achievements must be understood as subjective. This is why there must be a plurality of games in Suits’ utopia: there can be no ‘one game to amuse them all’. His utopians would seek the kind of games which would provide the best fit in terms of challenge (maxing out their capacities), based on age, ability, and bodily build (assuming, for the moment, that these parameters are fixed for the purpose of playing utopian games).

However, following the lines of Suits’ utopian thought experiment we can plainly see that having omniscient, omnipotent players would eliminate all potential sources of difficulty. For if utopian players of any sport wished themselves into wildly different bodily configurations from each other prior to a match (via their wish-granting supercomputers), then nothing could

stop them. From this fact we could infer that there is no essential utopian body, and thus there can be no utopian sports.⁶ This is because the capacity to throw a three-pointer in a game of basketball relies on having human arms within a certain range of lengths, the court being constituted of certain measurements based on the average rate of locomotion for a human, and the net being set far enough off the ground that making the shot is not trivial (say, not lower than the average human's height), but not so far off the ground as to make it punishing for the majority of human beings (say, not higher than a two-story building). In other words, the goodness of basketball's game design directly relies on the relative genotypical and phenotypical stability, and thus the predictable capacities, of our species. In order to protect the logical possibility of good utopian sports existing, Suits would either be forced to add the caveat that the telepathically-controlled supercomputers of his techno-Cockayne could not be used to transmogrify the human subject, or—more plausibly—require that utopian players coordinate on game rules forbidding or circumscribing their unrestricted intraludary use.

Conclusion

Suits' utopia is attained under conditions wherein instrumental activity is made redundant by technological advances, and everything which can be known in theory is in fact known in practice. Humans would then be free to pursue an unfettered life of intrinsically valuable game-playing, which in Suits' view best fits the human *telos*, and thus opens up the most promising available avenue to his version of *eudaimonia*. However, in order to sustain meaningful activity under such conditions, Suits must subscribe to something like the utopian

game design thesis, which is the logical extension of his capacity model of games—by designing better games, which allow for the expression of the greatest range of human capacities and the widest range of human experience, we allow for the possibility of making better people through gameplay. The best games are utopian games, and playing these utopian games shapes the best people, who are—or become—utopians. This is a reasonable projection of what Suits called the ‘*ideal of existence*’ (Suits 2014, 182) when his capacity model is taken into account; and this perfectionist backdrop helps make better sense of his urging contemporary game designers ‘to begin the immense work of devising these wonderful [utopian] games now,’ (Suits 2014, 194) for the realization of our human capacities is a moral imperative in the present even more so than in any utopian projection.

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² I am using a ‘switch’ metaphor to represent capacities here as a prose-friendly expedient, but in actuality capacities are more akin to *dials* on my account. Dials can be completely turned off (0%), completely turned on (100%), or stand at some percentile of ‘on-ness’ in between these two extremes. A ‘dial’ metaphor helps us explain why it makes more sense to say that there is one general capacity for all language use, instead of claiming that proficiency in each language should count as distinct expressions of separate capacities. Saying that a person who is fluent in both English and French is operating at 46% on the dial of their potential linguistic capacity would seem to make more sense than to say that they have both their ‘English language capacity’ and ‘French language capacity’ switches on. Being bilingual counts as two specific instantiations of the more general linguistic capacity, each of which nudge the ‘dial’ of realization of that capacity upwards. Thanks to Paul Gaffney for raising the point regarding language in this context.

³ There may indeed be an incommensurability of certain capacities—speed and strength for instance, or power and cunning—which make the fully realized individual an incoherent ideal, mirroring Isaiah Berlin’s argument regarding the incompatibility of certain goods in “The Pursuit of the Ideal”.

⁴ Ignoring, for the moment, the speculative evolutionary perspective from which we might argue that ‘arms are latent wings’.

⁵ Thi Nguyen believes that games have a morally transformative function in turning competitive urges into competitive behavior, and that good game design plays a central role in enabling this transformation. (Nguyen 2017)

⁶ This line of argument evolved from a long-running discussion with Jon Pike.