



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Play and games

**Citation for published version:**

Ridge, M 2019, 'Play and games: An opinionated introduction', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 14, no. 4, e12573.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12573>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/phc3.12573](https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12573)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Philosophy Compass

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Ridge, M. Play and games: An opinionated introduction. *Philosophy Compass*. 2019;e12573, which has been published in final form at:<https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12573>

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The Philosophy of Play and Games:  
An Opinionated Introduction

Some time ago, an Innocent Bystander, after glancing through a copy of *Mind*, asked me, 'Why do philosophers talk so much about Games? Do they play them a lot or something?'

(Midgley 1974: 321)

Philosophy has a Janus-faced relationship with games. On the one hand, philosophers love using games as model, arguing that phenomena as diverse as linguistic meaning (Wittgenstein 1999, Lewis 1979), meta-ethics (Enoch 2011), normative ethics (Rawls 1955), applied ethics (Langton and West 1999), law (Hart 2012), and aesthetics (Walton 1990) can be illuminated via an analogy with games. On the other hand, there is scant focused discussion of the concept of a game as such. This is problematic; the appeal to games as a model to clarify philosophically puzzling questions has limited utility if games themselves are poorly understood. Moreover, playing games plausibly is an important element in a good life; anyone interested in the theory of welfare, a traditional philosophical topic, should be interested in games. We *play* games, but if anything, play itself has been more neglected by philosophers than games. This neglect is unwarranted. Historically, philosophy has investigated foundational questions about human nature, and a disposition to play plausibly is a deep part of human nature. Moreover, play is an important concept in evolutionary biology and psychology, yet those working in those fields struggle to define the concept to their own satisfaction. E.O. Wilson went so far as to remark that “no behavioural concept has proved more ill-defined, elusive, controversial and even unfashionable than play.” (Wilson 1975: 64). One might have hoped philosophers could help here. In this paper, I provide an opinionated introduction to the philosophy of play and games.

Given that another survey paper in this area was recently published in these pages by Thi Nguyen (Nguyen 2017), I should say at the outset how the present paper differs from Nguyen’s and how the two are related. First, whereas Nguyen puts to one side any analysis of what I call play “full-stop,” the

analysis of play in this sense and an exploration of its relation to playing games is one of the main topics of the present paper. Second, Nguyen's contribution provides a more neutral and broad-ranging coverage of a vast and sprawling literature, whereas my "opinionated introduction" is more narrowly focused on certain core topics and the literature relevant to those topics and more structured around defending (albeit programmatically) the author's own preferred views on these topics. Third, Nguyen's discussion follows much of the work in "game studies" in that it focuses more on computer games than board games and the like; I take a more general approach here. Nguyen himself indicates that he takes this approach simply to track the focus of the literature with which he engages, but also adds that this focus on computer games is an "unevenness which needs redress." (section 2) In some measure, the present essay attempts to redress this unevenness. Fourth, the present essay takes a somewhat different methodology, engaging more in traditional forms of conceptual analysis than Nguyen's approach. This reflects a closely related difference. Nguyen's longer discussion aims to do justice to the *diversity* of kinds of game play, whereas the present essay tries to articulate what *unifies* the various phenomena we characterize as games. Once again, Nguyen himself (rightly in my view) thinks that though the existing literature does emphasize the variety of forms of game play, what is needed is a more unified approach, concluding his paper by remarking, "the most important work lies ahead, in *synthesizing* insights across these disciplines." (Nguyen 2017: conclusion, emphasis added). Nguyen's paper and mine are best seen as supplementing one another in the following way. Nguyen's paper provides a useful map of a vast and sprawling literature, and focuses more on video games (where there has been more recent literature). My paper, by contrast, helps *orient* the novice within that vast terrain and as a more opinionated piece also provides some tentative directions for how to make progress within it. Because my paper focuses less on video games, in particular, there is less engagement with the more recent literature addressing issues specific to those kinds of games.

## 1. Play

Because ‘play’ plausibly varies in content from one context to the next, I begin with semantics. Indeed, ‘play’ has a very interesting but seldom noted semantic profile. The verb form of ‘play’ has transitive and intransitive uses. Transitive uses include ‘play a game’, ‘play a joke’, ‘play a song’. However, we sometimes describe someone simply as playing, as in ‘Johnny was playing all afternoon’ where we do not mean he was playing a game, etc. Prima facie, this suggests that ‘play’ is ambitransitive – having transitive and intransitive uses. When used as an adjective ‘play’ is sometimes, but not always, what Peter Geach would call ‘attributive’. In Geach’s sense, a modifier ‘F’ is attributive if a locution of the form ‘x is an F G’ (for any arbitrary sortal ‘G’) either fails to entail ‘x is an F’ or fails to entail ‘x is a G’; otherwise it is predicative (Geach 1956). The clearest case of the relevant entailment failing is probably ‘play fighting’, which plausibly does not entail ‘fighting’. To be clear, on my view this attributive use of ‘play’ has a different sense from other uses of ‘play’, though these senses are related in interesting ways. Moreover, there is a considerably more cognitive demanding sense of ‘play’ when used attributively; ‘play’ in this sense may apply only to human beings. Here I have in mind play qua make-believe. A child who “play cooks,” for example, is engaging in a kind of make-believe fantasy which requires considerable conceptual sophistication and the ability to engage in robust pretence. At the same time, it is not hard to see how ‘play’ in this sense bears a striking similarity to ‘play’ in the other attributive sense laid out above. While dogs who are playfighting are perhaps not engaged in make-believe, depending on how cognitively demanding that is, it is nonetheless *as if* they are pretending to fight. There are, then, at least *two* closely related attributive senses of ‘play’, and my talk of “the” attributive sense of ‘play’ above is an oversimplification.

A useful working hypothesis is that non-transitive uses of ‘play’ as a verb are somehow most basic. It is apt to characterize gaming as *playing* games because of the connection between games and what we might call play (full-stop) - the activity invoked by non-transitive uses of ‘play’. What, though, *is* play (full-stop)? A useful starting point here is Bernard Suits’ work. Suits’ classic *The Grasshopper* is plausibly *the* most important work in the philosophy of games. Though he focuses more on playing

games than play (full-stop), Suits' view of the latter is also worth considering. Suits' considered view of play draws on Schopenhauer's characterization of play as the "discharge of surplus energy." (Cf. Schopenhauer 1818) Suits notes that 'surplus' means 'more than enough', so we must ask more than enough for *what*? Picking up on the idea that play is somehow "not serious," Suits suggests 'more than enough than is needed for one's purely *instrumental* ends'. Finally, the fact that play *contrasts* with purely instrumental activity suggests that it is activity for its own sake - "autotelic." Here is Suits' canonical definition:

X is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes. (Suits 1977: 124)

While initially tempting, this definition is open to several powerful objections. First, the reallocation of resources normally devoted to instrumental purposes is not necessary for play. A young child in a wealthy family may have no instrumental needs not automatically provided by his parents, and so not allocate any resources (including even his time) to such needs, yet intuitively such a child can and would play. Second, autotelic behaviour is not necessary for play. Very young children and simple animals may not have the conceptual sophistication needed to do something for its own sake, yet we correctly judge that they play. Third, Suits' conditions are not jointly sufficient. There are many forms of autotelic activity which meet his other conditions as well, but we would not normally classify as play. Intuitively, religious contemplation for its own sake is far too serious and contemplative to count as play, as is, doing one's moral duty for its own sake which also seems to count as play on this definition.<sup>1</sup> Fourth, the available empirical evidence suggests that being autotelic is not what guides ordinary speakers' judgments that some activity is play. In their empirical work on which the features ordinary speakers use when deciding whether

---

<sup>1</sup> Suits himself is willing to bite the bullet to some extent here, allowing that contemplation if done in non-utopian circumstances is a form of play, but not if done in utopia (Suits: 228-29). In my view, the idea that religious contemplation done for its own sake is play in either circumstance is highly implausible, and so is the idea that whether it is play should depend on whether the agent has any scarce resources. Thanks to Tom Hurka for drawing me out on this point.

to classify some activity as play, Smith and Vollstedt conclude, “the association of Intrinsic Motivation with play was to be found *insignificant* and *negligible* in amount in this study, and *its status within any definition of play should be questioned seriously.*” (Smith and Vollstedt 1985: 1048)

The error of defining ‘play’ in terms of autotelic activity is hardly limited to Suits. In fact, it is perhaps the single most commonly given necessary condition in definitions of ‘play’. It can, e.g., be found in Burke 1971.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this error, Burke’s theory is also worth some discussion, as other aspects of his definition are insightful. Burke defines ‘play’ as behaviour which is “free, complete in itself, and artificial/unrealistic.” For Burke, ‘complete in itself’ means ‘done for its own sake’, thus opening him up to the same counter-examples pressed against Suits. Burke’s inclusion of the condition that the activity must be artificial or unrealistic is meant to require that play have a sort of representational quality – play must “stand for” something. Insofar as the target of analysis is play (full-stop), this is problematic. A child frolicking on a hill or playing with his green beans need not be engaged in play qua make-believe.

Burke’s suggestion that play is essentially ‘free’ is a commonly made one, and this idea is corroborated by Smith and Vollstedt’s research, cited above. They found that what they called “Flexibility,” which is a kind of spontaneity/variety, scored very highly in speaker’s rankings of the criteria they use to decide whether some behaviour is play, and “any two out of Nonliterality, Positive Affect and Flexibility” has a 93% success rate in implying play and captures 60% of the play episodes (Smith and Vollstedt 1985: 1047). I think there is something in this, but the idea must be handled with care. My own view is that what we need is the idea of some behaviour being “unscripted.” An activity is scripted to the extent that the agent’s behaviour is fixed by some pre-existing “script,” as with habit or rote rule-following as on an assembly line. However, being

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Ellis provides numerous examples from the empirical literature of definitions couched in this way (Ellis 1978: 14). The mistake can also be found in Tasioulas 2006: 246 and Rasa 1971, to name just a few examples.

scripted is a scalar notion; it comes in degrees. The surface grammar of ‘play’ when used as a verb is in this respect misleading, as it suggests that someone is either playing or they are not. Whereas on the proposal defended here, it would be better to translate ‘is playing’ very roughly as ‘is being playful’ which clearly comes in degrees. This is important because some paradigmatic forms of play are scripted to some extent. Playing “House” or “Doctor,” for example can be scripted to some degree and still count as play. Even so, there comes a point at which these games are so scripted that they are more like novice theatrical productions than genuine play.

The suggestion that play must be autotelic, while incorrect, is also onto something. The ubiquitous suggestion that play must be autotelic arises from a failure to distinguish doing something for its own sake from doing it *for the fun of it*. These often go hand in hand, but they are not the same. One can do something for its own sake but find it onerous, as in carrying out a moral duty. Finally, the behaviour must be done “for the fun of it.” This condition is easily misunderstood. It is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing something “for the fun of it” in my sense that one self-consciously sets oneself the aim of having some fun, judges that an activity will be fun, and engages in that activity for that reason. This caricatured Kantian view of doing something for the fun of it is compatible with the agent having no fun at all. Nor is such deliberate aiming at having fun necessary for play, since it is doubtful at best that young children or other animals who we confidently characterize as paradigms of playfulness self-consciously aim at having fun. Doing something “for the fun of it” should instead be understood in terms of the behaviour *being* fun, and its being fun functioning to reinforce and further motivate the behaviour.

Finally, play must be *active* in some important sense. One might ride a roller-coaster for the fun of it, but this is not play because it is too passive. I therefore suggest the following definition:

An agent A is playing if and only if A is engaged in an unscripted activity for the fun of it.

I lack the space to argue for this definition properly here, but my hope is that it captures what is plausible in theories like Suits' and Burke's.<sup>3</sup> Here, in brief, are some of its advantages:

- (1) It avoids false negatives. The theory classifies paradigmatic instances of play, like a child rolling around on a hill, as play.
- (2) It avoids false positives. Unlike Suits' theory, this one does not classify e.g. religious contemplation as play.
- (3) It explains the link between attributive and predicative uses of 'play'. Plausibly, play fighting (e.g.) is often at the same time play (full-stop) in the sense given by this definition.
- (4) It offers a good theory of the *opposite* of play. Burke argues effectively that 'work' is not the opposite of 'play' (Burke 1971) and that the best work involves an element of play while the best play involves some work. On the account offered here, the natural opposite of 'play' is instead '*drudgery*', where drudgery is highly scripted and miserably repetitive.
- (5) It makes sense of theories of the biological function of play. One hypothesis is that play in some species has the function of helping the animal cope with the unexpected (Spinka et. al. 2001), which fits well with the idea that play is unscripted.

Obviously, this is just a sketch of a view, rather than a proper defense. With some rough idea of how we might usefully understand play (full-stop), I now turn to games.

## 2. Games

Bernard Suits' masterpiece, *The Grasshopper*, should be the starting point for any modern discussion of the philosophy of games. Suits' view is sharply opposed to that of Wittgenstein, who famously suggested that 'game' is a "family resemblance term." Wittgenstein's idea is roughly that there is nothing all games have in common in virtue of which they are games. Wittgenstein's idea

---

<sup>3</sup> I defend this proposal at much greater length in *Ridge* in progress.



is open to multiple interpretations. One influential reading is that family resemblance terms express “cluster concepts” – very roughly, concepts one masters not by mastering a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but by learning a set of features each of which is relevant to whether the concept applies. One worry about the very idea of a cluster concept as an alternative to the classical conception is that such concepts arguably can still be defined by a highly disjunctive set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Cf. Gert 1995). I shall, however, not try to settle the best interpretation of Wittgenstein here, as that is a large and difficult topic which has already received voluminous attention (see Pelczar 2000 for an intriguing approach which draws on modern semantics, though).

Suits replies to Wittgenstein’s thesis by arguing not that there are no family resemblance terms, but that ‘game’ is not among them. Written in the form of a witty dialogue, *The Grasshopper* lays out Suits’ definition, defends it against an impressive battery of objections and then explores the value of games so understood. Suits characterizes playing a game as, roughly, voluntarily overcoming unnecessary obstacles. Less roughly, he argues that ‘play a game’ should be defined in terms of four individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: (1) Engage in activity aimed at bringing about a state of affairs, (2) using only means permitted by rules, (3) where those rules prohibit more efficient means, and (4) where those rules are accepted just because they make the activity in question possible (Suits 2005: 48-49). In golf, one aims to bring about a state of affairs (the ball in the cup), using permitted means (using clubs in appropriate ways), where these rules preclude more efficient means (dropping the ball in the cup by hand), and where one accepts these rules just because they make the activity possible. The definition offers a unified conception of game play insofar as the fourth condition effectively incorporates the other three – the lusory attitude itself makes reference both to the rules (and their inefficiency) and the goals. Suits’ theory tries to explain how game play differs from other rule-governed activity in that one adopts the end in order to make possible the activity of taking the means to that end, effectively reversing the

normal order of explanation in which one adopts rules of thumb in order to help achieve some independently specified end. Suits at one point characterizes this distinctive feature of games as “reverse English.” (Suits 2005: chapter 9)

Suits usefully distinguishes “closed games” (like golf and chess) “open games.” The lusory goal of a closed game is also a game-ending goal. In an open game like “Endless Ping Pong,” where the players just try to keep the ball in play indefinitely, there is no game-ending goal, but this still counts as a game for Suits since the goal “keep the ball in play” is fit for purpose as a pre-lusory end, and this end is constrained by rules against e.g. using a machine to keep the ball in play. Open games are important for Suits because they allow him to classify make-believe games like “Cowboys and Indians” and “House” as games, not to mention role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (see Suits 2005: chapter 12).

Suits’ theory is a kind of “formalism” - it asserts that playing a game should be understood in terms of its formal rules and constitutive goal. In an important paper, Fred D’Agostino argues that formalism neglects what he calls the “ethos” of a game (D’Agostino 1981). Canonically American football is 11 players per side, but a pick-up game not meet this condition. The formal rules of basketball forbid forms of contact often tolerated in practice. D’Agostino argues that where formalists like Suits distinguish only permissible from impermissible behaviour, we need to distinguish between behaviour that is permissible, impermissible but acceptable (fouling in basketball to stop the clock), and impermissible and unacceptable (disqualifying the offender from even playing the game) (D’Agostino 1981: 15). This approach arguably provides a more plausible way of individuating games, avoiding the implication that any variation in the rules, however minor, means you have two different games. D’Agostino’s suggestion can be seen as a friendly amendment to Suits’ approach.

One point seldom noted about Suits’ definition is that *other people* are conspicuous for their absence from it. We need some account of what it is for someone to play a game *with* someone

else qua opponent - as opposed to qua playing piece, e.g. It is, however, not obvious how to extend Suits' theory to explain this. In my view, we should take a slightly different approach.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that we understand what it is for two or more people to play a competitive game with one another in terms of undertaking certain *commitments* to one another – commitments to follow the relevant rules and pursue the relevant goal. Commitments here are understood as *communicative acts* of a certain sort – effectively promises, albeit often tacit promises. Obviously, two people *simply* undertaking such commitments is not sufficient for a game to have been played.<sup>5</sup> It is not impossible to break a promise to play a game. At a minimum the players must “show up” at the designated time and place – though given online games the notion of ‘place’ here must be understood liberally to include, for example, “locations” in cyberspace. Even if those who exchanged the necessary commitments all “show up,” a game will not be played if they are not quorum as specified by the game in question. With these considerations in mind, I propose that a multi-player game (single-player games must be understood differently) has been played when a set of individuals (who are jointly quorum) undertake commitments to abide by the game’s rules and pursue its constitutive aim, they all show up at the right time and place, and the score progresses to a point at which a result (win, loss, or draw) is determined.

This proposal adverts to the rules/goals of a *game*, but without some account of what makes some set of rules/goals count as game rules/goals the definition is circular. Here a *functional* approach has many advantages. Call a set of rules and associated goal(s) a “practice.” A given practice is a *game* practice insofar as it has the right functions – and the rules which partly make up such a practice are thereby the rules of that game. The rough idea is that there is a range of functions we associate with the concept of playing a game. These include playing (full-stop), having fun, providing an opportunity for achievement, and socializing in distinctive ways. I am

---

<sup>4</sup> In what follows I draw on Ridge forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Oddly, though, A.J. Kreider explicitly holds a view on which undertaking such commitments *is* sufficient for playing a game. See Kreider 2011.

inclined to take a pluralist view on which a range of functions like these are all relevant, and having “enough” entails that a practice constitutes a game. This functional account provides a partial vindication of some of the core ideas in Suits’s account. Even though Suits has not provided a defensible and fully general definition of ‘play a game’ he has plausibly identified an important *function* of games –they enable us to make a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles,” (Suits 2005: 55) which in turn means they are vehicles for achievement.<sup>6</sup>

The account as just sketched says only what it is for a group of people to have played a game *in its entirety*. Interestingly, ‘play a game’ is semantically like ‘write a book’ playing a game doesn’t entail you have played a game just as writing a book does not entail you have written a book. We need another distinction to remedy this. Certain activity types admit of a normative role and a rule-following conception. In one sense, to engage in such activities one must simply occupy the relevant normative role. In another sense, engage in such activities one must both occupy the relevant role *and* actively engage in rule-following behaviour associated with that role. Suppose someone is enrolled as a doctoral student from 2009 until 2014. In one sense, this is enough to make it true that from 2009 until 2014 he was pursuing a PhD. There is a more demanding sense in

---

<sup>6</sup> One might worry that the proposed definition is too broad. For example, one might worry that an amateur theatrical production of *Hamlet* counts as playing a game on the proposed definition, since the practice of theatrical production has amongst its functions having fun, achievement and promoting a certain sort of socializing. A fuller discussion would emphasize that the relevant functions must be suitably *primary* – they must play an especially important role in explaining why the practice proliferates over time. In the case of theatrical productions, I take it that the primary functions are conveying the playwright’s narrative in a way that lives up to certain aesthetic standards – not just telling a good story, but telling *this* good story, in effect. That function, though, would not plausibly appear on any list of functions which are definitive of games as such. Moreover, because theatrical productions are scripted, they do not typically involve much play (full-stop), and while they do encourage socializing, much of this socializing is done by those in the audience during intermission and not the putative “players” (the actors). Indeed, even when the actors do not get along well, the “show must go on,” which suggests that socializing by the players (as in a friendly game of poker) is not among the primary functions of the practice – it does not play a primary role in explaining why the practice survives and proliferates. Of course, the account in the text is not sharply defined, and if one modifies the case enough then it may become more plausible to characterize it as a game. *Improvisational theatre*, for example, does strike me as intuitively more game like precisely because that practice does proliferate over time because it affords an opportunity for a structured form of play. One might worry that this is still too broad, since e.g. improvisational jazz should not count as a game. In the case of jazz, though, I think it is the *product* and not the activity that explains the proliferation of the practice – the fact that improvisational jazz produces such aesthetically valuable music. Furthermore, improvisational jazz does seem more naturally characterized as a kind of game than e.g. a production of *Hamlet*, so the theory on offer here is arguably partly corroborated by the example. Thanks to Tom Hurka for drawing me out on the issue of over-breadth.

which someone counts as pursuing a PhD at a point in time only if he is engaging in behaviour constitutive of trying to complete his degree – doing research, e.g. This distinction applies to locutions of the form ‘play a game of G’. To be a game player at a certain point of time, it is enough that someone has undertaken the relevant commitments with like-minded others, shown up at the right time and engaged in “enough” rule-following activity. From the fact that someone is a game player at time t, it follows *in the normative role* sense that he is playing G at t.

This completes the account of multi-player games by articulating two senses in which someone can count as playing such a game at a given point in time – even if complete game has not been played. We now have an account which explains both what it is for a game to have been played in its entirety and for someone to be playing a game at a point in time regardless of whether that game is ultimately completed. This account will need to be extended to cover single-player games. My view here is that ‘play a game’ is context-sensitive, and that something closer to Suits’ view is correct when it comes to single-player games – though even there we should include a functional component to avoid over-breadth. Unfortunately, I lack the space to explore this extension of the proposed account here (see Ridge forthcoming). I conclude this section by explaining how the account of multi-player games improves on Suits’, while recognizing that his overarching account is simpler than my own in virtue of not needing a shift in content between single-player and multi-player games.

First, unlike Suits’ account, by taking the basic unit of analysis as *sets* of people, the commitment-based approach seamlessly explains what it is for one person to play a game *with* someone else. Second, Suits’ theory seems overbroad: parliamentary debate,, giving testimony in court and waging a just war all arguably come out as instance of playing games, since in each case one is overcoming unnecessary obstacles for the sake of some end where one accepts the rules for

the sake of engaging in that activity.<sup>7</sup> The role of *function* in the present theory avoids this overbreadth – these activities lack the right kinds of functions to count as games. Third, Suits’ theory entails that cheaters are not playing the game when they cheat, since they are then not following the rules, and Suits accepts this upshot. Nor is Suits alone in this; many theorists embrace this view.<sup>8</sup> The implication that anyone who cheats thereby is not playing the game is problematic, though. This is clearest in the case of the *inveterate* cheater – someone who cheats throughout the game. Suppose someone uses a marked deck throughout a game of poker to gain an advantage. Plausibly, he was cheating throughout the game. However, this seems implausibly to imply that he never played the game on Suits’ theory. The commitment-based account, by contrast, easily accommodates the possibility of cheating while playing the game. Someone who is cheating is still playing the game in the *normative role* sense, but not in the *rule-following* sense. Fourth, the commitment-based account can accommodate the possibility of a “trifler” playing the game. Triflers act as if they are playing a game but do not try to win. In Suits’ framework, this means that they are not even playing the game, but this is implausible. Parents routinely play such games with their children without trying to win, and a tournament chess player could hardly argue that he did not lose his game (and so should not lose rating points) because he was not trying to win and so did not even play a game. The commitment-based approach, by contrast, vindicates the idea that triflers can still be players. They are obviously playing the game in the normative role sense if they have undertaken the relevant commitments – or, at any rate, their trifling does nothing to undermine their

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tasioluas 2006: 238. Tom Hurka in Hurka forthcoming provides another way around these kinds of counter-examples. He defends a friendly amendment to Suits’ theory on which the lusory attitude requires that most other people accept the rules precisely because they provide a kind of challenge you value – that is, most people accept the rules for the sake of the difficulty they impose on achieving the end. I lack the space here to do justice to Hurka’s very interesting approach, which has interesting similarities to my functional approach. As the pluralism of my own functional account suggests, though, I think the insistence that most other people accept the rules specifically for the sake of the difficulty they impose is too narrow – other functions, like providing a vehicle for structure play, can make a practice constitute a game, in my view (think e.g. of games like *Chutes and Ladders* for a clear case of this, or games of pure chance played for money). I also prefer the functional approach’s more elegant explanation of why most people would have had to have engaged in the practice for the right kinds of reasons to making it axiomatic that “most people” have to engage in the activity for the right reason(s).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. also Dellatre 1976: 136, Fezell 1988, and Ross 1968: 25.

occupying such a normative role. Furthermore, triflers who are not cheats will also typically be playing the game in the rule-following sense.

### 3. Value Theory

So far my discussion has focused on how we might analyse ‘play’, ‘game’ and cognates. What, though, about the *value* of play and games? To some extent, this is an empirical question, as many of the advantages of play and games are instrumental and so depend on the actual consequences of play (Cf. Brown 2010). However, it is also plausible and more philosophically interesting that play and games can *constitute* (either partly or fully) certain goods.

The non-instrumental value of play (full-stop) deserves far more philosophical investigation than it has so far received. Because a disposition to play is such a striking feature of human nature, many theorists in the Aristotelian tradition include play in their objective lists of goods which constitute human welfare (Cf. Nussbaum 1992, Finnis 1980; compare Celano 1991). Even those theorists who do include play as a basic constituent of the good life, they say next to nothing about the nature of play and its role or relative importance in the good life. This area is in my view, ripe for further philosophical investigation.

What about games? Once again, *The Grasshopper* provides a useful entry point. *The Grasshopper* self-consciously follows the model of Plato’s *Republic*. Having spent most of the dialogue defending a definition of ‘play a game’ in the final chapter we find an argument for the intrinsic value of game play. Suits (in the voice of the grasshopper) asks the reader to imagine a “Utopia” in which there is no scarcity of any kind. He then argues that with all our instrumental needs met, we would struggle to find anything to *worth doing*. Even the search for knowledge is ruled out by the assumption of total abundance, since not only material scarcity but the scarcity of more abstract goods like knowledge has been eliminated in Utopia. Love, friendship, and art are ruled out as playing the needed role in the “ideal of existence.” (Suits 1977: 170-171) The

problem in Utopia is that “there is nothing to strive for precisely because everything has already been achieved. What we need, therefore, is some activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is instrumentally valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end. Games meet this requirement perfectly.” (Suits 1977: 172) Because we rightly value this kind of activity for its own sake, games provide a vehicle for an intrinsically valuable activity even in Utopia. Suits then points out that the denizens of Utopia could reintroduce all the other activities we value instrumentally in our non-utopian state if we “make a game of them.” The carpenter builds a house not because houses are scarce, but because he values overcoming the challenges associated with carpentry.

Although I lack the space to engage properly with Suits’ arguments here, I find his defence of the thesis that playing games is the supreme good unconvincing. However, I agree with Thomas Hurka’s assessment that Suits makes a good case for the weaker thesis that playing good games is *among* the intrinsic goods. Hurka’s discussion occurs in one of the few other sustained philosophical discussions of the value of play and games, in an exchange with John Tasioulas (Hurka 2006 and Tasioulas 2006). Hurka restricts his thesis to *good* games - games that are difficult enough to be challenging but not so difficult as to be practically impossible. Hurka argues that playing good games is intrinsically good because “difficult activities are as such good” (Hurka 2006: 221). First, he argues that overcoming challenges to bring about some end constitutes *achievement*, and he appeals to the intuitive idea that achievement is intrinsically good. Second, he argues that achievement is in a certain sense the practical analogue of knowledge. As with knowledge, there is a match between mind and reality, but here the “direction of fit” is the other way around. Just as knowledge is sometimes intrinsically good, so is achievement. Whereas the intrinsic value of knowledge varies directly with the extent to which that knowledge involves complex explanatory relations, the intrinsic value of achievement varies directly with the complexity of the means-ends relations involved.



Hurka then points out that in Utopia, all game players will be amateurs rather than professionals – they will play for the love of the game. This follows from the absence of scarcity – there will be no instrumental reason to play games – professionalism will have no place in Utopia. What Suits argues is valuable is game-playing that is also play, though here Suits is using ‘play’ in a stipulated sense as simply meaning ‘activity engaged in for its own sake’.<sup>9</sup> Hurka calls this ‘playing in a game’ and argues that playing in a game is intrinsically good (in another way – one that goes beyond the intrinsic value of difficult activity as such) because it involves loving something which is itself intrinsically good – namely difficult activity. He then appeals to the thesis that loving that which is intrinsically good for the feature in virtue of which it is intrinsically good is itself intrinsically good (a view he defends at length elsewhere himself) to conclude that playing in a game is intrinsically good.

In his exchange with Hurka, Tasioulas offers a very different account. For a start, he objects to Suits’ definition of ‘play a game’, on which Hurka relies. Most notably, he argues that Suits’ definition is overbroad, a point I rehearsed in the previous section. In my view, this objection does not cut very deep, since Hurka’s arguments would, if sound, work on the account of playing games offered here. More interestingly, Tasioulas argues that achievement is not the most fundamental or general good associated with playing games. First, many games are simply not well understood in terms of striving or achievement. Games of chance are more about “the thrill of surrendering to fate and delighting in good fortune” (Tasioulas 2006: 241) Tasioulas suggests that the more fundamental and general (non-instrumental) good associated with playing games is playing (full-stop).<sup>10</sup> He reminds us that playing is plausibly partly constitutive of welfare for

---

<sup>9</sup> Note the contrast with his considered view of the meaning of ‘play’ in English – in that sense there can be no play in Utopia because play involves reallocating resources normally allocated to instrumental activities. In Utopia there *are* no instrumental activities, and so such reallocation is impossible. Suits embraces this consequence, but it strikes many as a reduction of his definition of ‘play’.

<sup>10</sup> Actually, Tasioulas himself does not sharply distinguish playing a game from playing (full-stop), perhaps because he would deny that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn there. He may think that all play is in some sense playing a game and that all game play involves what I would call ‘play (full-stop)’. Insofar as one allows, as I shall argue we should, that there is a distinction to be drawn here, though, it seems clear that what Tasioulas

creatures like us, drawing on both the work of philosophers analysing welfare as well as documents like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which includes a right to play (Tasioulas 2006: 241).

Tasioulas then argues that difficult activity as such is not intrinsically good. Borrowing a famous example from John Rawls, he argues that counting blades of grass (accurately under time pressure) may well be difficult but it is not therefore good. On his account, achievement is intrinsically good, when it is, only because the activity is independently good in some other way (contrast Bradford 2015). What we need, then, is some further value to *ground* the value of achievement. On Tasioulas' view, with games, this value is typically what I have called "play (full-stop)." Hurka and Tasioulas' views provide an elegant contrast. They both agree that play (full-stop) and achievement are good-making elements of game play. However, Hurka explains the value of play (full-stop) in terms of the prior value of achievement (play (full-stop) means you love achievement, which is itself independently good), whereas Tasioulas explains the value of achievement in terms of the prior value of play (full-stop). My own view is that neither play nor achievement is without qualification more fundamental. Rather, we should endorse what I have called a "variable priority" view of the relation between these values. Granting that achievements require some further grounding value, sometimes this will have nothing to do with play (full-stop), but instead results from *aesthetic* value, e.g. In those cases, the intrinsic value of the achievement may in turn ground the value of loving the activity for its own sake (though, in my view for reasons sketched in section 1, this is not a good account of "play (full-stop)," this is really a merely verbal dispute with Hurka), and in those cases Hurka will to that extent be right. In

---

has in mind is what I am calling play (full-stop). I therefore impose this distinction on the text in the interest of clarity in the present framework.

other cases, play (full-stop) will indeed be the relevant foundational value, and Tasioulas will to that extent be right. However, I lack the space to defend this view here.<sup>11</sup>

So far, I have focused on the value of playing games *in* one's life. Another interesting thesis in this vicinity is that the best life is one itself lived *as* a game. Avery Kolers defends this view and argues that it is the real lesson of *The Grasshopper* in Kolers 2016. Kolers argues that the best life is one played as a "nested, open, role-playing game" in which the quality of one's life as a game depends partly on there being as many players as people. Kolers motivates this idea by pointing out that we regard games as ultimately trivial, yet while we are engaged in them they seem very important. This, he suggests, can help address the way in which life can seem ultimately pointless, given that in the long run we are all dead. Life itself might seem trivial from a cosmic perspective, but that does not prevent us from finding it rewarding as we live it any more than the fact that games are ultimately trivial precludes us from finding them rewarding so long as we are immersed in them. Kolers insightfully points out how his reading gels well with one of Suits' earliest articles in which he explores the idea that life itself might be a game we are playing (Suits 1967).

## **Conclusion**

I have only scratched the surface of the range of important topics raised by the philosophy of play and games. Topics left out here include sport and its relation to games, the role of play/games as a model of other philosophically puzzling phenomena, the role of play/games in the history of philosophy, and a variety of questions in applied ethics (drugs in sport, e.g.). My hope is that the reader will be sufficiently familiar with the more foundational issues discussed here to more effectively pursue these and other topics in the broader domain of the philosophy of play and games.

---

<sup>11</sup> I argue for the variable priority view at greater length in Ridge under consideration.

## Bibliography

- Bradford, G. 2015. *Achievement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, S. 2010. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*. (Penguin: New York)
- Burke, R. 1971. "Work and Play." *Ethics*: 33-47.
- Celano, 1991. "Play and the Theory of Basic Human Goods." *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 2: 137-146.
- D'Agostino, F. 1981. "The Ethos of Games." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*.8: 1-18.
- Ellis, M. 1978. *Why People Play*. Prentice-Hall. USA.
- Enoch, D. 2011. "Shmagency Revisited." In Brady, M. *New Waves in Meta-ethics* (Palgrave: 208-233)
- Finnis, J. 1980. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Geach, P. 1956. "Good and Evil." *Analysis*. 17: 32-42.
- Gert, H. 1995. "Family Resemblance and Criteria." *Synthese*. 105: 177-190.
- Hart, H.L.A. 2012. *The Concept of Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hurka, T. 2006. ““Games and the Good I.” Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. 217-236.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Forthcoming. “Suits on Games: Slightly Restricted, Slightly Revised,” In Hurka, T. (ed.) *Games, Sports, and Play: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Katsfanans, P. 2013. *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kolers, A. 2016. “The Grasshopper’s Error: Or, On How Life is a Game.” *Dialogue*. 54: 727-746.
- Kreider, A.J. 2011. “Game-Playing Without Rule-Following.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 38: 55-73.
- Langton, R. and West, C. 1999. “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game.” *Australasian. J. of Philosophy*. 303-319.
- Lewis, D. 1979. “Scorekeeping in a Language Game.” *Journal of Philosophical Logic*: 339-359.
- Midgley, M. 1974. “The Game Game.” *Philosophy*. 49: 231-253.
- Nguyen, T. 2017. “Philosophy of Games.” *Philosophy Compass*.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/phc3.12426>
- Nussbaum, M. 1992. “Human Functioning and Social Justice.” *Political Theory*. 20: 202-246.
- Pelczar, M. 2000. “Wittgensteinian Semantics.” *Nous*. 34: 483-516.
- Rasa. 1971. “Social Interaction and Object Manipulation in Weaned Pups of the Northern Elephant Seal *mirounga angustirostris*.” *Z. Teipyschol*. 29: 82-102.
- Rawls, J. 1955. “Two Concepts of Rules.” *Philosophical Review*. 64: 3-32.
- Ridge, M. “How to Play Well with Others.” Forthcoming in Hurka, T. (ed.) *Games, Sports, and Play: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Under Consideration. “Games and the Good Life”  
 In Progress. “The Meaning of Play.”
- Schopenhauer, A., 1818/1844 [1907], *The World as Will and Idea (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)*, tr. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Smith, P. and Vollstedt, R. 1985. “On Defining Play: An Empirical Study of the Relationship Between Play and Various Play Criteria.” *Child Development*. 56: 1042-1050.
- Spinka, M., Newberry, R. Bekoff, M. 2001. “Mammalian Play: Training For the Unexpected.” *Quarterly Review of Biology*. 76: 141-168.
- Suits, B. 1967. “Is Life a Game We are Playing?” *Ethics*. 77: 209-213.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1977. "Words on Play." (Presidential Address) *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*.  
IV: 117-131.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Broadview Press.

Tasioulas, J. 2006. "Games and the Good II." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. 237-  
264.

Walton, K. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wilson, E.O. 1975. *Sociobiology*. Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA.

Wittgenstein, L. 1999. *Philosophical Investigations*. Prentice Hall.