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Are there really games in Utopia? A reinterpretation of Suits's *The Grasshopper*

Melanie Erspamer , Michael Ridge

Abstract: In this essay we argue that there is a contradiction lurking at the heart of Bernard Suits's seminal book on the philosophy of games, *The Grasshopper*, which has oddly gone unnoticed for 43 years. Suits argues that games need inefficiency and defines inefficiency such that it wouldn't exist in Utopia. This trivially entails that there could be no games in Utopia, yet the whole normative point of *The Grasshopper* is that games would be the only worthwhile activity in Utopia. We then diagnose Suits's error and suggest some ways forward.

In his influential book *The Grasshopper*, Bernard Suits defends a definition of 'play a game' and then argues for game-playing's distinctive value. The argument for this distinctive value makes heavy use of the idea of an idealized society, Utopia, where there is no scarcity. Suits maintains that, in Utopia, playing games would be our only worthwhile activity. We argue, however, that there is a contradiction lurking at the heart of *The Grasshopper*. Surprisingly, Suits's definition of 'play a game' makes it impossible to play games in Utopia.

Here is Suits's definition of 'play a game':

to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (2014: 36)

Intuitively, this definition describes a wide variety of games. A classic game, such as chess, works well: in chess, one aims to bring about a specific state of affairs (checkmate), using only means permitted by the rules of chess, where those rules prohibit more efficient means (moving the pieces directly into checkmate position) in favour of less efficient means (pawns can only move forward, kings can only move one square at a time etc.) and where such rules are accepted just because they make chess possible.

Our objection focuses on the definition's requirement that game rules impose inefficiency. Suits clarifies his concept of inefficiency in Chapter 5, when the Grasshopper (the hero of Suits's dialogue) responds to an objection by Skepticus, one of his disciples. Skepticus thinks the Grasshopper's definition is overbroad because it wrongly entails that someone (Smith) who chooses to take the longer way home is playing a game. This is because Smith is supposedly imposing a kind of rule on himself, namely 'do not take the shorter route', where that rule prohibits a more efficient means to his end (being home), and he does so just to engage in that activity, thus satisfying all the necessary (and jointly sufficient) conditions of the Grasshopper's definition

Yet the Grasshopper argues that it is not necessarily the case that Smith's rule imposes inefficiency in the intended sense of 'inefficiency'. Here is Suits:

I define efficiency as the least expenditure of a limited resource necessary to achieve a given goal. I specify limited resource because if some resource is unlimited there is no reason to say that using more of it is less efficient than using less of it would be The trouble with the Smith counter-example, therefore, is that it is not ... a case which exhibits a selection of inefficient means, since there is no indication that any of the means that Smith proposes to use in getting home require drawing upon a limited resource. (2014: 57–59)

The Grasshopper then adds that it is no use insisting that time is a limited resource for everyone, for time should not be viewed as a resource at all unless it is treated by the agent as a resource for achieving some goal, and it should not be viewed as limited unless it sets a limit on the kind and number of one's goals. Time might therefore not be a limited resource for Smith, according to Suits (2014: 63).

So, for there to be inefficiency in a game, there must also be a limited, or scarce, resource relative to the game's goal. A further complication arises from the fact that this relevant scarcity apparently need not exist independently of the game. Instead, as Suits argues in his posthumously published sequel, 'The return of the Grasshopper', games are 'scarcity generators':

Suppose that someone invented a kind of machine that produced scarcity all on its own, so that there would result a scarcity surplus without a plenitude deficit Games are precisely such machines Games can create an increase in scarcity without a decrease in plenitude because the kinds of scarcity produced by games are new kinds of scarcity Games generate scarcities by inventing them. Aside from card games there is no scarcity of cards in the world. But in card games that resource is reduced to fifty-two and no more. (2019: 223)

It seems, then, that the scarcity needed for inefficiency and hence game play can be of two sorts. First, it could exist independently of the game. For example, Suits suggests an alternative version of the taking the 'long way home' example where Smith's time is limited independently of the game because he 'has another goal which also requires time for its completion' (2014: 55). Here Suits plausibly maintains that Smith is playing a game: a 'race with the sun'. Second, the relevant scarcity could be introduced by the game itself, as with the scarcity of cards introduced by card games.

We can now explain how Suits's account of the inefficiency needed for game play is in tension with game play in Utopia. As Suits defines Utopia, there is no scarcity of any kind: 'whereas our own culture is based on various kinds of scarcity – economic, moral, scientific, erotic – the culture of Utopia will be based on plenitude' (2014: 175). Suits thus crafts a vision of Utopia defined by a lack of instrumental needs. This vision has far-reaching and radical consequences: Suits argues that, without any form of scarcity, many intrinsically valuable activities would cease to exist, including art, love and friendship. The argument here is complex but the point is that Suits needs such an extreme Utopia to justify his normative conclusion: that what we need 'is some activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable ... games meet this requirement perfectly Game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living' (2014: 172). Thus, the prima facie contradiction is evident. Utopia is defined as a place without scarcity of any kind.¹

To a first approximation, our argument is as follows:

1. On Suits's definition of 'play a game', necessarily one plays a game only if one adopts a rule that imposes inefficiency.
2. On Suits's definition of 'Utopia', necessarily there is no scarcity in Utopia.
3. On Suits's definition of 'inefficiency', necessarily if there is no scarcity then there can be no inefficiency.
4. Therefore, given Suits's definitions of 'play a game', 'Utopia' and 'inefficiency', necessarily there can be no game play in Utopia.

The conclusion, rather shockingly, is that there could be no game play in Utopia. Yet each premiss of the argument seems to follow trivially from Suits's own definitions.

At this point, one might think that our objection seems plausible only if we focus on scarcities that exist independently of games. What of the artificial scarcities introduced by games, as with Suits's example of card games? Surely this provides the decisive rejoinder to our objection. On this account, Suits can allow that there is no natural scarcity in Utopia, but this is perfectly consistent with our introducing all sorts of artificial scarcities, and it is these artificial scarcities that make game play possible.

Although superficially plausible, careful reflection reveals that this reply is unsound. There is a crucial ambiguity hidden here, which becomes clear when we remind ourselves that, for Suits, inefficiency is always

relative to some end. In the context of game play, that entails either the prelusory or the lusory end. Both answers prove disastrous to Suits's reply.

Let us suppose, on the one hand, that inefficiency is indexed to the prelusory end, that is, the goal of a game described in non-game terms (e.g. putting a golf ball in a hole). That is clearly Suits's view: 'We may therefore define constitutive rules as rules which prohibit use of the most efficient means for reaching a prelusory goal' (2014: 52). However, in Utopia our resources for achieving the prelusory goal of any game are, given the definition of Utopia, unlimited. Take Suits's preferred example of golf: we can presumably use supercomputers to transport golf balls into their holes. We can do this via telepathy, instantaneously. Of course, we would not be playing golf, but that is irrelevant – the concept of a prelusory goal is that it can be achieved independently of the game. So if we understand inefficiency relative to the prelusory end, there can be no inefficiency in Utopia, and our objection stands.

This suggests that it would be more promising for Suits to revise his canonical definition and hold instead that rules impose inefficiency relative to the lusory end, that is, the goal of a game described in game terms (e.g. getting a higher score). It would spoil the way he applies his view to certain games, such as golf, but potentially salvage the role of games in Utopia as 'scarcity generators'. However, this reply immediately fails: the problem is that the lusory end presupposes following the rules; for Suits, if you break the rules, then you are not even playing the game. The cheat might convince others that he has won, but he has not really won because he did not achieve the lusory end. This is for a simple reason: the lusory end is defined in terms of following the rules.

This means that the rules cannot impose any inefficiency on the achievement of the lusory end, for, by definition, the only way to achieve the lusory end is by following the constitutive rules of the game. So making the inefficiency relative to the lusory end would not help. Thus, either way, Suits's account implies that game play is impossible in Utopia. Given that the main normative point of the original book arose from the central, structuring role of game play in Utopia and what this, in turn, tells us about the 'ideal of existence', this is a significant problem for Suits.

Let us consider more deeply why the idea that games are 'scarcity generators' does not neutralize this difficulty. Consider Suits's example of a card game like poker. In a standard game of poker there is a sense in which the rules make aces (say) into a scarce resource: independently of the game, I may have access to several aces, but within the game, I can only use two to construct a strong hand. Crucially, though, generating scarcity in this way is not sufficient for generating inefficiency. Inefficiency in Suits's sense requires not only that the relevant resources be scarce, but that their scarcity rules out some other more effective way of achieving the relevant goal. As Suits puts it, the rules 'prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means' to the relevant end, clearly indicating a counterfactual condition. However, since the 'artificial' scarcity introduced by the rules of a game is relative only to the lusory end, it produces no possible inefficiency, for the reasons already laid out above: there is no alternative way of achieving the lusory end that the rules preclude. The key point, then, is that inefficiency in the needed sense requires not only scarcity but a counterfactual condition, but in games, that counterfactual condition cannot be met.

The upshot is that the idea that games are scarcity generators does not solve Suits's problem. For, if inefficiency is understood relative to the prelusory end, there will be no scarcity – at least, not in Utopia. If, on the other hand, inefficiency is understood relative to the lusory end, there will be scarcity but no inefficiency. This is because the scarcity is introduced by juridical fiat – conceptually, as it were – rather than by (say) making certain resources for the achievement of the lusory goal physically unavailable. Thus there is no inefficiency because there can be no way of achieving the end which does not adhere to the rules; the counterfactual condition is not met.²

Our considered argument, then, is as follows:

On Suits's definition of 'play a game', necessarily one plays a game only if one adopts a rule that imposes inefficiency.

On Suits's definition of 'Utopia', necessarily the only scarcity in Utopia is the kind of scarcity generated by games.

Necessarily the kind of scarcity generated by games cannot generate the sort of inefficiency demanded by Suits's definition (either the relevant end is prelusory and no scarcity is generated at all, or the relevant end is lusory, in which case there are no alternative means to the end and so no inefficiency is imposed).

Therefore, even Suits's definitions of 'play a game', 'Utopia' and 'inefficiency', necessarily there can be no game play in Utopia.

Why did Suits go wrong? Our diagnosis is that Suits has chosen the wrong method of dealing with the problem raised by his 'long way home' example. Instead of defining inefficiency in terms of limited resources for a certain goal, he could have gone another way. In particular he could have adopted the friendly amendment recently proposed by Thomas Hurka (2019). Hurka suggests that Suits revise the lusory attitude so that one adopts game rules to make possible a kind of activity one values for its own sake specifically because of its rule-imposed difficulty – that is, for the challenge it presents. There can be difficulty in Utopia, in the conventional sense, without Suits's specific account of inefficiency, for example making a hole-in-one on a long golf shot. To make room for the pure professional, Hurka suggests that the lusory attitude is not necessary as long as enough other people who adopt these rules do so for the sake of the challenge they present. Because Hurka's definition does not rely on the concept of inefficiency, but rather on difficulty, it does not run into our objection. However, it also has the resources to accommodate the idea that taking the long way home is not necessarily a game, so long as Smith (in that example) does not take the long way home for the sake of a challenge but instead for, say, a change of scenery. Hurka can appeal to his motivational constraint, rather than to the concept of scarcity, to accommodate the example. Hurka's definition is arguably too narrow, however, as it does not include children's games and games of pure chance. Hurka tries to mitigate this objection by invoking an ambiguity in 'difficulty' as between requiring skill, on the one hand, and being unlikely to succeed, on the other. Games of pure chance typically involve difficulty in the second sense but not the first: for example, your chances of winning at roulette are not high. Some children's games are a tougher challenge for Hurka, but here he might follow Suits's lead with respect to 'Ring around the Rosie' and argue that these activities are not really games at all. Moreover, because Hurka offers the definition as a piece of 'conceptual engineering' rather than a 'straight analysis' (which is how he reads Suits's own project), he might not be too worried by this objection in any case. A full discussion of these concerns about Hurka's approach would go beyond the scope of the present essay.

To sum up: we have argued that there is a contradiction lurking at the heart of *The Grasshopper*, one that has escaped attention for 43 years. Suits requires an inefficient use of a scarce resource for games but defines Utopia as bereft of scarcity. And Suits's suggestion that games are scarcity generators does not help. The inefficient use of scarce resources must be relative to some goal, where a more efficient use of those resources is possible; and we show that such inefficiency cannot be generated relative to either the prelusory or the lusory goals of Suits's definition without precluding game play. We conclude with a suggested friendly amendment (from Hurka) that can avoid our objection.