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Too Much Playing Games – A Response to Kretchmar

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ABSTRACT

Scott Kretchmar recently put forth a new definition of what it is to play a game. Unfortunately, it must be rejected. In this paper, I will show that this new definition is far too broad by discussing an activity that is not an instance of playing a game but is wrongfully ruled as one on this new definition.

KEYWORDS

Game definitions; nature of games; Suits; Kretchmar; gameplay

Recently, Scott Kretchmar published a useful critique of the classic Suitsian definition of what it is to play a game, and then went one step further by offering up a new definition of what it is to play a game. While there is merit to his work, the result is flawed. In this brief paper, I will show that Kretchmar's new definition of what it is to play a game is too broad in that it incorrectly classifies certain activities as game-playing activities and therefore must be rejected.

To start things off, we should put on the board the classic Suitsian definition, as well as Kretchmar's new definition. As should be familiar to most readers of this journal, the classic Suitsian definition is 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]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. (Suits 1978, 41)

And now Kretchmar's new definition:

To play a game is to attempt, through effort, chance, or both, to solve a natural or constructed problem; where relationships between its means (lusory means) and ends (lusory goals) provide valid challenges; where inherent constraints (regulative rules), together with any imposed limitations (constitutive rules), and interpretive understandings (prevailing ethos), specify the goals and means permitted for reaching those goals; and where these specifications and permissions are accepted in order to encounter, for either one's use or enjoyment, the problem thereby created (lusory attitude). (Kretchmar 2019, 10)

Kretchmar also offers a 'Portable Version' in addition to the 'Unabridged Version' quoted above. This shorter definition is as follows: 'To play a game is to attempt to solve a gratuitous problem'.

While there are multiple changes, arguably the most important is the difference in status of constitutive rules. The Suitsian definition requires that there be constitutive

rules which make it harder to achieve a prelusory goal (Kretchmar's definition also does away with prelusory goals), and that these rules are accepted for the purpose of making the activity possible. Kretchmar's definition allows for constitutive rules but does not require them. To give a counterexample to Kretchmar's theory, I will discuss an activity which has no constitutive rules and which is clearly not an instance of playing a game, but which does fit Kretchmar's definition of what it is to be playing a game.

Beyond merely showing that Kretchmar's definition is too broad, the result of this brief paper will support the more general view that constitutive rules are required for the correct definition of what it is to be playing a game. Without constitutive rules, we might have a meaningful attempt to do something challenging or enjoyable, but we will not have gameplay. However, my paper will not fully argue for this positive result, and the core negative result of the inadequacy of Kretchmar's theory can stand without it.

I will argue that *attempting to create a free verse poem* is an activity which generally will not be an instance of playing a game, yet falls under Kretchmar's revised definition of what it is to play a game. By 'free verse poem,' I mean a poem without any required constraints (e.g. there aren't any sort of rhyming or meter structures that needs be followed). While there might be rules of skill for how one can be better or worse at creating free verse poems, or inherent constraints of language, there are no external constraints imposed to make the task more difficult rather than less; that is, there are no constitutive rules that govern how one is to achieve the lusory goal. Note that the lack of constitutive rules for the activity of creating a free verse poem is sufficient to show that this activity won't count as an instance of playing a game for the Suitsian, which is the correct result.

Briefly, we should note that attempting to create a free verse poem fits the portable version of the definition, namely that attempting to create a free verse poem 'is to attempt to solve a gratuitous problem'. While there might be rare occasions where one *must* create a free verse poem, so that we wouldn't want to call it a gratuitous problem, in typical cases the problem of creating a free verse poem is gratuitous in the sense where '[i]t is a problem where aiming at the end result is necessary for what the game player really wants—the experience of facing the challenge' (Kretchmar 2019, 13).

That our example fits Kretchmar's portable version tells us we are on the right path. Now we will turn our attention to the full definition to show that it will rule that this activity is an instance of playing a game. We start with the first clause of the definition, which is as follows:

'To play a game is to attempt, through effort, chance, or both, to solve a natural or constructed problem;'

In creating a free verse poem, the poet is attempting through effort to solve the problem of having created a free verse poem. Although we wouldn't typically label such thing a 'problem' in common speech, it is as much a problem to be solved as getting balls in holes (golf, netball, etc.) or keeping fantasy alive (cops & robbers, Dungeons & Dragons, etc.). I remain agnostic as to whether this is a natural or constructed problem, but as those are the only two options for problems, it shouldn't matter for the purpose of fitting Kretchmar's definition.

Next up, we have the middle two clauses of Kretchmar's definition:

'where relationships between its means (lusory means) and ends (lusory goals) provide valid challenges; where inherent constraints (regulative rules), together with any imposed limitations (constitutive rules), and interpretive understandings (prevailing ethos), specify the goals and means permitted for reaching those goals'

As mentioned above, there are no constitutive rules when it comes to creating a free verse poem. There are, however, inherent constraints, also known as regulative rules. Our imperfect languages and language skills provide the inherent constraints on the process of creating a free verse poem. The limited expressive power of whatever language(s) we know constrain our ability to express ourselves, regardless of if this is in writing or speech (a free verse poem can be handwritten on a napkin, typed on a computer, sung as a song, spoken without emotion, or exist in many other formats). There are also 'interpretive understandings' which constrain what is considered a good or a successful poem. The 'prevailing ethos' of the poetry community (or whatever community is relevant in the particular context) can help to determine what counts as a successful free verse poem. These inherent constraints and interpretive understandings make it so that it isn't too easy or too difficult to achieve the lusory goal of the activity; they make sure this is a valid challenge.

Now for final clause:

'and where these specifications and permissions are accepted in order to encounter, for either one's use or enjoyment, the problem thereby created (lusory attitude)'.

The final criterion is the lusory attitude. For the Suitsian, the lusory attitude requires accepting the constitutive rules in order to make the activity possible. For Kretchmar, the lusory attitude needn't require an acceptance of constitutive rules as there needn't be constitutive rules in the first place. Rather, it requires accepting whatever 'specifications and permissions' are required for the activity to be that activity. In the present case, that would be whatever 'specifications and permissions' are required for this activity to be an instance of creating a free verse poem. Here the lusory attitude would require both accepting the goal of the activity being a free verse poem, as well as accepting the inherent constraints of language. But what does it mean to accept this constraint, given that it is an inherent constraint and the poet has no other options. A counterfactual could be of use here.

Take a comic book example of a strong psychic, say Jean Gray of the X-Men. She can, among many other things, make it so that others can experience what she experiences and think what she thinks via direct psychic manipulation. To see if a poet has the proper lusory attitude, we can ask if they'd still try to write a free verse poem to express themselves if they had the skills of Jean Gray. My assumption is that the vast majority of those who accept the goal of a free verse poem would accept these inherent constraints of language, because otherwise—despite being better able to express themselves—they wouldn't be able to experience the challenge of trying to create a free verse poem.¹

If the above is correct, I have shown that the attempt to create a free verse poem fits Kretchmar's new definition of what it is to play a game. However, creating a free verse poem is not—except in special circumstances—an instance of playing a game! Given this, we must reject Kretchmar's new theory for being too broad.

What's more, it's not just attempts to create free verse poems that pose a problem for Kretchmar's definition, but attempts to create all sorts of poems. While many poems have constraints on what they must be like—say having a particular rhyme or meter—these are constraints on the poems themselves, not on how to create the poems.² The constraints on the poems are just specifications of the goal to be achieved; they are not constitutive rules or any other 'imposed limitations' on the means for reaching that goal. It is important to differentiate the end goal of some activity from the constraints on how one can act while engaging in that activity. Rules impact both, but in importantly different ways, with only the second being constitutive rules (at least as typically used in this discussion).

As Suits tells us in *The Grasshopper*, rules can have two importantly different functions for an activity; '[i]n one case they are used to *describe* a state of affairs, in the other to *prescribe* a procedure' (Suits 1978, 45). This is illustrated with a discussion of chess. In chess, the state of affairs of a checkmate is described by rules about how pieces can move. This is not, however, the same as a prescriptive rule telling us how to get to that goal. To see this, note that we can have some state of affairs being checkmate without the prescriptive rules ever being followed. The pieces can be initially placed in the relevant arrangement, or the pieces can be moved systematically in ways that don't conform with the rules (e.g. by moving pawns three spaces at a time). With regards to poetry, although we can have rules that describe what counts as a poem of the relevant type, we (generally) don't have prescriptive rules telling us how to go about creating such a poem; that is, we don't have constitutive rules for creating a poem.³

Not only will a typical attempt to create a free verse poem be a counterexample to Kretchmar's definition, but a typical attempt to create any sort of poem will be a counterexample.

That being said, one can impose constitutive rules onto the attempt to create a poem, which I suggest—but shall not argue for here—would turn it into an instance of playing a game. For example, one could attempt to make a poem with the constraint of only using the tiles from a Scrabble board, or by rearranging the words printed on some particular piece of paper. We would rightfully call such endeavors instances of playing a game, but these are the exceptions to the general cases of trying to create a poem, which we should not accept as instances of playing a game.

This brief paper was intended to provide a counterexample to Kretchmar's new definition of playing a game. To do so, I showed that creating a free verse poem fits this new definition. However, for this to be a successful counterexample, it must also be the case that it is not an instance of playing a game. While I think that creating a free verse poem is clearly not playing a game (at least in typical instances), one might respond that Kretchmar's view actually gets the correct result here. Unfortunately, we cannot appeal to theories of gameplay to adjudicate this debate, as it is such theories that are at issue. And while I think most will agree that typical instances of creating poetry (or at least creating a free verse poem) are not instances of playing a game, I realize that some could disagree.

But even if we are willing to accept the counterintuitive result that creating poetry is playing a game, not to mention the broad proliferation of activities that would count as instances of playing games under Kretchmar's definition, we still have a problem. It seems that there is something importantly different between playing games such as chess, football, or 200m dash on the one hand, and creating poetry and other sorts of creative gratuitous enterprises—perhaps such as writing a book—on the other. The key difference: the first group have, and the second lack, rules that constrain how one goes about reaching the goal, rather than merely rules that constrain what that goal is. That is, the first group, but not the latter, have constitutive rules.

Even if one is friendly to the result that there are many more instances of gameplay out there than previously thought, and that Kretchmar's view is correct to rule that creating free-verse poetry is playing a game, they should still care about this distinction. We might be left with two distinct definitions, playing a game on Kretchmar's view and 'playing a game*', say using the Suitsian view, that each capture real and important

aspects of gameplay. While I admit that this is an option that can be explored, I think that the correct result of this discussion is just to reject Kretchmar's view about what it is to play a game.

Notes

1. While this brief discussion might give us reason to view typical attempts to create free verse poems as play activities rather than work activities, we must remember that not all play activities need be gameplay activities (and neither must all gameplay activities be play activities).
2. A helpful reviewer gave the example of poetic line to suggest that even free verse poems might have rules in an important sense. While such a rule might very well be part of what determines what counts as a free verse poem—and might be how the term 'constitutive rule' is used in many fields dealing with poetry—it is not a constraint on the actions or moves one makes while creating a free verse poem, so would not count as a constitutive rule as typically used in the philosophy of games literature. Nonetheless, this suggests that creating free verse poems might be, for present purposes, no different from creating any other more complex type of poem.
3. Thanks to Andrew Edgar for pushing me to clarify this distinction.

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