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## Bernard Suits' Legacy: New Inspirations and Interpretations

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we contextualize and introduce the papers that comprise the special issue, “Bernard Suits’ Legacy: New Inspirations and Interpretations.” The articles discuss the work of Suits to raise, formulate, and face challenges that it presents to open new philosophical debates on his philosophical analysis of play, game, and sport. The issue comprises 13 articles that explore the two central themes in *The Grasshopper*. One section focuses on the ontology of games, whereas the other centers on the normative aspects of game playing, that is, on Suits’ notion of Utopia. The special issue closes with three brief reports concerning recent translations of *The Grasshopper* into foreign languages, a biographical note on Suits, and an interview with Cheryl Ballantyne, Suits’ widow. We hope that the works contained in the special issue will help further the knowledge and stimulate the study of Suits’ work not only within sport philosophy, but also in those fields where discussions on the nature of games and the good life are prevalent.

### KEYWORDS

Suits; legacy; definition of; game; Utopia

### I. The Relevance of Suits’ Work

Ever since Bernard Suits (1925–2007) published his first article on games, ‘Is Life a Game We Are Playing?’ (Suits, 1967), his work has become omnipresent in the philosophy of sport and is increasingly getting more influential in other philosophical areas such as aesthetics, ethics, and theory of games. A sign of the presence and growing popularity of his work is that four new translations—Chinese, Japanese, Polish and Portuguese—of his seminal book, *The Grasshopper: Game, Life, and Utopia*, have been published in the last three years. In addition, multiple articles, dissertations, and book chapters on his work have been published, shedding new light on his theory of games and view of the good life. Despite the attention vested on Suits’ work, there are still many controversies around it. This is not because of the unorthodox nature of his work—for *The Grasshopper*, like Plato’s works, is written in dialogical form—, but mostly due to the ambitious character of his philosophical project. Suits’ analysis of game playing attempts to elucidate classic philosophical questions related to the nature of definition, the goals of philosophy, and the good life, problematizing ideas from philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Schelling, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, among others (Hurka 2006). The articles in this special issue discuss the work of Suits to raise, formulate and face challenges that it presents to open new philosophical debates on Suits and the nature of play, game and sport.

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## II. The Ontology of Suitsian Games

The first six articles explore issues related to the ontology of games by problematizing Suits' classic definition of game playing as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2014, 43). In doing so, they submit Suits' definition to critical analysis, evaluating its adequacy, consequences and implications. In 'A Revised Definition of Games: An Analysis of Grasshopper Errors, Omissions, and Ambiguities,' by building upon his previous work on Suits and engaging in discussions in the sport philosophy literature, R. Scott Kretchmar presents multiple objections to Suits' definition of game playing. Based on these considerations, he proposes an amended version of the definition, namely: to play a game is to attempt to solve a gratuitous problem. After having presented his definition, Kretchmar compares it to Suits', exploring the differences between them and analyzing the strengths of his definition. He concludes by arguing that his amended definition deals more effectively with the objections to Suits' discussed earlier in the paper.

Also tackling Suits' definition of game playing, Lukas Schwengerer's article, 'An Epistemic Condition for Playing a Game,' argues that Suits' conditions of playing a game are not jointly sufficient for providing an adequate account of game playing. Schwengerer analyzes where subjects' actions meet Suits' conditions, but are not games because the subject lacks some knowledge relevant for genuine game playing. Thus, in Schwengerer's view, Suits' original definition is too broad and must be supplemented by an epistemic condition, stating that the players must have sufficient knowledge of the goals and rules of the game to act as participants in them. That is to say, a player's behavior must be rule-following based on the player's representation of the goal and rules of the game. Schwengerer clarifies that this knowledge does not require players to know the rules and goals in an explicit and detailed way. Rather, they must have access to the rules and goals of the game so that they can follow the rules and pursue the goals reliably enough while playing the game.

Unlike Kretchmar and Schwengerer, Miroslav Imbrišević's article, 'Suits on Strategic Fouling,' focuses not on the definition of game playing itself but on a more specific issue related to it. Particularly, he explores whether strategic fouling—that is, breaking a rule deliberately to gain an advantage while accepting the penalty—can be accommodated within Suits' theory of games. According to Suits, 'to break a constitutive rule is to fail ... to play a game at all' (Suits 2014, 40). However, in order to account for strategic fouling as part of game playing, Suits introduces a 'third kind of rule' (Suits 2014, 40), that is, a rule that is neither a rule of skill nor a constitutive rule and whose violation results in a fixed penalty. Imbrišević claims that this attempt is not successful, because Suits' account suffers from internal contradictions.

On the same topic, in 'Formalism conventionalized,' Eric Moore defends Suits' definition of game playing from some common objections made against it, including that it cannot accommodate strategic fouls. In Moore's view, Suits' theory of games is more flexible than its critics seem to think. Thus, he argues that formalism should not be conflated with 'officialism'—that is, the view that only the official rules constitute the game. It is possible

to understand formalism as a theory which, apart from the official, codified rules, makes room for conventions that interpret or modify the official rules. To support this claim, Moore draws on David Lewis's account of coordinating conventions and Andrei Marmor's account of constitutive conventions. To illustrate the force of formalism supplemented by conventions—'Conventional Formalism'—Moore analyzes the example of children's game, 'Red Light Green Light', to show that, at least in non-institutionalized settings, the rules of a game might be changed during its course without cheating.

Also concerning rule breaking in Suits' account of games, Alex Wolf-Root, in 'Pre Game Cheating and Playing the Game', analyzes cases of pre-game cheating such as taking performance-enhancing drugs prohibited by the rules or tampering with equipment. Thus, he raises the question of whether individuals engaging in such behaviors are playing a game according to Suits' definition. To answer this question, Wolf-Root draws on Avery Kolers' notion of nested games—playing one game might be the lusory means of a second, larger game. There are games within games, and the rules of inner or nested games might differ from those of larger games. By applying the notion of 'nested games' to cases of pre-game cheating, Wolf-Root concludes that 'pre-game cheaters' are at the same time playing a game and not playing a game, depending on the game that is taken into account.

Paul Faulkner's article, 'What Are We Doing When We Are Training?' connects the two themes in the special issue. In light of both the definition of game playing and the notion of Utopia, Faulkner analyzes the role training would play in Suits' theory of games. Whereas on Suits' ground the distinction between amateurs and professionals is sharp, the status of training—undertaken both by amateurs and professionals in preparation for competition—is puzzling. After entertaining and rejecting some possibilities (training is a game, play, work), Faulkner finally concludes that training can be seen as a Utopian activity, that is, an activity that has instrumental value and is intrinsically valued at the same time. Faulkner further supports this claim by building upon Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of 'social practice'. In training, both amateurs and professionals practice sport and enjoy goods internal to the sport as practice. This holds true even if the training has some further, instrumental end.

### III. Suits' Exploration of the Good Life

The last seven articles in the issue focus on Suits' notion of the good life, which he explores through the depiction of Utopia, where the need for all instrumental activities has been eliminated, and individuals spend their lives engaging in purely autotelic activities. As game playing is, according to him, the only activity of that kind, Utopians go about their lives by playing games. That is to say, playing games is the activity that leads to the good life. Some of the articles in the last part of the issue explore what it means for individuals to devote their lives to play games and what kind of games they would play. Other articles explore and challenge specific aspects of Suits' view of the good life and Utopia.

In 'The Alexandrian Condition»: Suits on Boredom, Death, and Utopian Games', Christopher Yorke analyzes a dilemma of Utopian existence. The dilemma relates to the fact that, because of the elimination of work from Utopia, individuals find themselves in an 'Alexandrian Condition'. Their life is meaningless without work. They can

only escape this condition by finding another activity to give meaning to their lives. Failing to do so would lead them into despair and eternal boredom. The possibility of falling into a state of eternal boredom undermines Suits' claim that Utopian life is the most worth living. Yorke salvages Suits' characterization of Utopia by identifying two different temporal states of Utopian life:  $U_1$  and  $U_2$ . In  $U_1$ , individuals turn known activities into games. In contrast, those in  $U_2$  create unknown games that provide them with opportunities to realize their capacities fully. Utopians, in Yorke's view, would find salvation from eternal boredom by moving into state  $U_2$  through the creation of interlocking games that provide them with the excitement and sense of achievement of current, non-Utopian occupations.

In a similar vein, Deborah Vossen's article 'The Play in the Game Utopians Are Playing' argues that Utopians must give meaning to life through some existentially significant goal-directed effort. Drawing on Suits' and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notions of play, Vossen conceives of Utopian life as involving a cooperative quest for achieving a mindful, contemplative state of being-in-the-zone. On her view, such a life might be found in a 'work-at-playgame playing ethic' because it involves engaging in an intrinsically valuable activity (*play*) that allows for the self-contained exercise (*game playing*) of instrumental action (*work*) without instrumentalizing the practice itself. According to Vossen, this ethic presents as superior to the play-to-work, work-to-play, play-at-work, and work-at-play ethics because none of them involves engagement in a purely autotelic activity.

In 'Ludic Constructivism: Or, Individual Life and the Fate of Humanity', Avery Kolers, like Yorke and Vossen, argues that Utopians must view life as a game consisting of playing interlocking games that are part of a higher level, nested, open and cooperative game that he calls 'Fate of Humankind'. Assuming this view of Utopian life, Kolers raises the question of whether such a life would be compatible with morality. His response to this question is that not only the ludic life and morality are compatible but also that the former provides a formal structure for constructing moral rules superior to any other constructivist approach to morality. In his view, individuals who view their life being part of an open, cooperative game would recognize others as equal partners in the common enterprise of going about life.

Francisco Javier Lopez Frias' article, 'Bernard Suits' Response to the Question on the Meaning of Life as a Critique of Modernity', provides a different, individual-focused interpretation of the normative character of Utopia. In his view, Suits' Utopian thesis relates less to human life in general and more to life in modern society, which is defined by engagement with instrumental rationality. Thus, for Lopez Frias, Suits deploys Utopia to provide an ontology of modern existence and criticize it for its passive reliance on the deployment of instrumental reason. For Suits, according to Lopez Frias view, an ideal life must be devoted to game playing because it allows individuals to realize their autonomy fully by increasing their negative freedom and providing opportunities for the exercise of their positive freedom.

In line with Lopez Frias' individual-focused interpretation of Utopia and Kolers' analysis of the connection between Utopia and morality, Daniel M. Johnson's article, 'When Life Becomes a Game: A Moral Lesson from Soren Kierkegaard and Bernard Suits', argues that regarding life as a game, or playing 'Real-Life Games', is morally problematic in some occasions. That is to say, those where participants downplay the relevance of

the goal of an activity to place more value in its pursuit. This, according to Johnson, leads to the development of two moral vices: spiritual apathy and vainglory. The former consists in the lack of appreciation for higher moral and spiritual goods and focus on exercising one's powers disregarding the interests and well-being of others. The exercise of these powers tightly connects to the second vice, that is, the distorted desire for recognition and appreciation. Thus, those who turn life into a game are at risks for trivializing important goals just to show their powers and gain recognition. To conclude, Johnson illustrates his analysis by showing that academics often turn reflection into a real-life game, downplaying the value of their activity and, therefore, engaging in immoral, vicious behavior.

The last two articles critically analyze specific aspects of Utopia, bringing to light theoretical problems in Suits' notion of the good life. In 'Suits' Utopia and Human Sports', Steffen Borge analyzes the notion of 'Utopian sports', that is to say, the types of sports that Utopians would play as compares it to 'human sports'. In doing so, he explores whether Suits' ideal of the good life can help understand current sporting practices. According to Borge, it cannot. In his view, because the circumstances in which humans and Utopians find themselves are radically different, the configuration and specificity of their sports differ significantly. Whereas humans engage in sport to fulfill the need for dominance and competition, Utopians lack such needs. Thus, humans and Utopians play sport for different reasons. Therefore, Borge concludes that reflecting on Utopia to shed light on current sports is misleading.

Nathan Wildman and Alfred Archer's article, 'Playing with Art in Suits' Utopia', analyzes Suits' claim that Utopians would devote their lives to playing games only, excluding the possibility of there being other Utopian intrinsically valuable activities such as art, that is, engaging with and creating artworks. Wildman and Archer challenge Suits' claim and argue that art has a place in Utopian. To do so, they provide three arguments. One centers on the possibility that Utopians could play 'dual-natured games' that are both games and artworks. Another argument is that they might play 'art-inclusive games' that require engaging with art in order to participate in them. The last argument is that Utopians could engage by playing 'art-production games' whose goal is to create a work of art.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Exploring New Avenues for the Analysis of Suits' Work**

The next section in the special issue contains three brief reports concerning recent translations of *The Grasshopper* into foreign languages. In 'On the Japanese translation of Bernad Suits, *The Grasshopper, Games, Life and Utopia*', Shigeki Kawatani and Takahiro Yamada present a story of the Japanese translation published in 2015. Tien Mei Hu and Yu Ping Chou in 'The Journey towards Chinese translation of *The Grasshopper*' explain their journey in translating Suits' masterpiece into Chinese in Taiwan in 2016. In the same year, the Polish translation was published. Filip Kobiela's 'Playing with the Polish translation of *The Grasshopper*' narrates the story behind it. Whilst professional philosophers basically refer to the original, English version of the book, it is important for the wider public to have an opportunity to read it in their native languages. Such translations might serve to create a relevant terminology in these languages and stimulate new research also outside the area of philosophy.

The special issue closes with a biographical note on Suits and an interview with Cheryl Ballantyne, Suits' widow, to whom we would like to express our gratitude for taking the time to respond to our questions and providing the biographical information. We hope that the works contained in this special issue will help further the knowledge and stimulate the study of Suits' work not only within sport philosophy but also in those fields where discussions on the nature of games and the good life are prevalent. Despite the unorthodox character of his work, Suits has the potential to become a classic in multiple philosophical disciplines. Hopefully, in a couple of decades, more academic publications studying his legacy will be published in fields other than sport philosophy. To conclude, we would like to thank the contributors to the special issue, Andrew Edgar (current editor of SEP), Mike McNamee (former editor of SEP), and the staff at the Suits fonds in the Special Collection and Archives at the University of Waterloo. This special issue would have not been possible without their support.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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