Article

Grasshopper Theology: Games, Play, and the Ideal of Existence

By Chad Carlson and Brian R. Bolt August 22, 2021 No Comments

Can game playing possibly be the ideal of existence? Philosopher Bernard Suits argues that it is, using a twist on the moral logic of Aesop's fabled grasshopper. While many philosophers have weighed in on this question, none have done so with a Christian lens. In this article, we consider Suits's body of work on the philosophy of games and then we "play" with the possibility of game playing being the ideal of existence. We suggest, with help from a few key theologians and philosophers, that a reduced focus on game results and a reconceived focus on striving in games present a vision of game playing that just might allow Suits's assertion to be compatible with the eschaton. ***Chad Carlson** is an Associate Professor of Kinesiology and the Director of General Education at Hope College. **Brian Bolt** is Dean of the Education Department and Head Men's Golf Coach at Calvin University.*

Hidden away in an obscure corner of academia is a charming little book called The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia.[1] This gem is as fundamental to the academic sub-discipline of sport philosophy as any other text. Sport philosophy is a small but growing aggregation of scholars who reside in the chasm between Kinesiology and Philosophy Departments, promoting the study of play, games, and sport as academic content. Sport philosophers reference Bernard Suits, author of *The Grasshopper*, like classicists reference Homer. *The Grasshopper*, first published in 1978, continues to drive sport philosophy discourse, articulating concepts deeply embedded within the young sub-field in ways that resonate profoundly with its membership. Yet the book's impact outside of sport philosophy remains small.

In *The Grasshopper*, Suits, an American-born philosopher who spent his career at the University of Waterloo in Canada before passing away in 2007, argues that game playing is the ideal of human existence. This thesis, when offered without context, sounds polemical or even incredible. How can game playing be the ideal of human existence when the human experience is so varied and broad? While many sport philosophers support the claim that game playing may be one option amid various common conceptions of the ideal of human existence, to articulate it as the ideal appears overly prescriptive and absolutist.

In fact, in the large volume of sport philosophy scholarship that cites Suits's work, authors have both praised and criticized it in numerous ways. Yet no one has offered a Christian perspective on his conception of the ideal of existence. In this article, we aim to do just that. We want to engage Suits as Christians, and this article is a start. We will lay out Suits's definition of game playing and then explore the merits of his contentious thesis that game playing represents the ideal of human existence. We analyze this by combining theories from Christian scholars regarding boredom and idleness as the roots of game play. These theories help us understand the basis of Suits's claims. We close by offering a Christian engagement with Suits's thesis. We are "playing" with Suits's conception of the ideal of existence. And we hope this will s

further conversation. Is there a place for game playing in a Christian vision of the ideal of existence? Our arguments follow one particular axiological claim: at their core, games matter only because game players say they do.

The Grasshopper

The Grasshopper is both a dense philosophical treatise on the value of game playing and a satirical puppet show of fictional characters. As the title indicates, Suits flips Aesop's fable about the grasshopper on its head. Suits has the protagonist Grasshopper, in its dying autumn days, share with its ant friends—eponymously named Skepticus and Prudence—that playing games is the ideal of existence. The Grasshopper dies before being able to share why. The ants, left without the answers they so fastidiously seek, deductively reason their way to *some* conclusions based on their recollections of the parables the Grasshopper offered during mid-summer conversations. They come to understand why the Grasshopper encouraged them to engage in intrinsically-valued activities. That is the flip on Aesop's morality: the ants exhibit *skepticism* and *prudence* before accepting the Grasshopper's seemingly hedonistic views. Skepticus and Prudence come to understand that their Aesopian morality—work so that one can outlive the winter—is inferior to the Grasshopper's. Indeed, they come to value intrinsically-motivated activity—play—which is often antithetical to their industrious nature. Yet they cannot seem to understand why the Grasshopper would value the playing of games over play that does not take the form of games. This is what we will analyze in this article: why would Suits privilege game playing over other forms of play? And is this compatible with Christian conceptions of the ideal of existence?

Just as the ants are on the verge of despair at their inability to answer this axiological question, Suits resurrects the Grasshopper. The ants' excitement over this Christ-like turn of events quickly fades as they realize that the Grasshopper is not going to give them straight answers. Instead, the Grasshopper seems to be playing games with them. Skepticus and Prudence question the Grasshopper about the nature of games

before asking the value questions. The Grasshopper responds, providing ever-more-ontological musings. This theatrical yet philosophical dialogue ends with the Grasshopper dying once more while beginning to share its vision of the ideal of existence. Skepticus and Prudence so badly want a direct answer: why should we privilege game playing over play that is not in game form? The book ends as the ants, much like Jesus' disciples after His ascension, are left to make sense of all the elusive teachings and this incomplete vision.

That is the entertaining summary of *The Grasshopper*. The philosophical synopsis consists of Suits's three main arguments: an essentialist definition of game playing, the relationship between play and games as distinct but compatible phenomena, and privileging game playing over other forms of play. We will describe Suits's three arguments and then "play" with the third, using Christian concepts.

What is a Game?

In writing *The Grasshopper*, Suits opened a new niche of philosophical exploration. While many scholars from many disciplines have studied play, Suits was the first to find philosophical interest in the distinct concept of games. *The Grasshopper* is an attempt to define games and explain that they do far more than that which is implicit in the popular maxim "it's just a game." In games, Suits believes he has found much more than ordinarily meets the eye. He elevates the uniqueness of games within the human experience. And it all starts with an understanding of what games are and what they are not.

Suits unapologetically rejected anti-definitional models. He wanted clear lines demarcating the boundaries of games.[2] Accordingly, in *The Grasshopper*, Suits articulated a definition of game playing that has three[3] necessary and sufficient conditions: all games have goals, all games have rules which limit the available means, and all who participate in games—if they are to be considered game players—mu take on, among any other reasons for participating, the lusory attitude.[4]

Suits described game goals in two ways. The first is a prelusory goal. The word "prelusory"[5] is a Suits creation that denotes the description of a game goal absent the rules. It would be something like describing a game to an alien who has no context. For instance, the prelusory goal of a running race is to get to the end first; the prelusory goal of Monopoly is to take all of the other competitors' money. The prelusory goal is important because it clarifies the basic endeavor of a particular game. If we ask, "What am I supposed to do in this game?" the simplest answer constitutes the prelusory goal.

Understanding the prelusory goal becomes easier when contrasted with Suits's second type of game goal: the lusory goal.[6] If the prelusory goal is a description of a game goal absent or before (hence: "pre") the game rules, the lusory goal is a description of a game goal that assumes an inherent familiarity with the game's rules. In soccer, the prelusory goal is to put the ball into one net and keep the opponents from doing so into the other; the lusory goal is to score goals and keep the opponents from doing so. In chess, the prelusory goal is to knock the other player's king off the chessboard; the lusory goal is to reach checkmate. Reaching the goals of soccer and chess as such represents achievement, a fundamental *telos* of game behavior. Striving to reach the goal of a game before, more than, or better than an opponent represents competition, another possible *telos* of game behavior.

The distinction between prelusory and lusory game goals is important when looking at the second necessary condition of games: rules.[7] If, when James Naismith invented the game of basketball at the Young Men's Christian Association Training School in 1891, he had said, "The goal of the game is for one team to get the ball into the peach basket while keeping the other team from doing so in the other peach basket, and that is all you need to know…now go play," the original players may have found unique methods of achieving the competitive goal. They may have tackled each other to improve their access to the ball and basket. They may have punched each other. They may have put one player with the ball on the shoulders of another. But Naismith

created the game with specific behaviors in mind. He wanted to offer a vigorous indoor game that would specifically not include violent behavior such as that which his students exhibited in football and rugby. So, on December 21, 1891, he posted 13 rules that drove game behavior. According to the rules, tackling and punching are penalties ("fouls"), and putting a ballhandler on the shoulders of another player is a violation ("traveling").[8]

When Naismith says, "put the ball into one basket while preventing the other team from putting the ball into the other," he provides a prelusory goal, and players could use whatever means they like to accomplish the goal. But when Naismith says, "score points, and prevent the other team from doing so," this is a lusory goal, because it implies adherence to rules that limit the means one can take to reach the goal. All games have rules that limit the means available to reach the goal.[9]

In this sense, games are inefficient and, therefore, somewhat absurd.[10] In much of our existence, we use the most efficient means possible in order to reach our goals. It would be foolish, unfavorable, or adverse for someone to use less than efficient means to do the dishes, complete the budget report, or write a scholarly article. But in games, we rule out the most efficient means to reach the goal because that makes the activity more challenging and therefore different from our ordinary behavior. Sport philosophers call this gratuitous logic: in games, we create superfluous challenges and problems to solve because doing hard things that are unnecessary can have inherent value and provide joy.[11] Indeed, gratuitous logic is baked into Suits's game structure. Rules which limit the available means for obtaining the game goal—thereby making it harder than it has to be—are a necessary condition of games. We create and add game rules in order to exclude certain behaviors that make the game too easy and therefore less appealing, and in order to set the game on track when it has gone awry.[12]

So, games are activities that have goals and rules that limit the possible means for obtaining the goals. This much is clear and at least somewhat intuitive. But Suits not satisfied that this is sufficient to define game playing. Thus, he adds one more

condition to his definition. He says that game players must have the lusory attitude, among other possible intentionalities, in order to be playing a game.[13] What is the lusory attitude? The term is another Suits creation and he uses it to describe when one accepts the rules of the game as conditions that limit available behaviors just so that the game can occur. This definition on its own does little to disclose its importance.

Suits elucidates the lusory attitude by presenting examples of stock characters who appear to be game players but who actually are not. First is the *cheat*. A cheat is someone who reaches the goal or at least attempts to do so without following the rules. The cheat disregards the gratuitous logic in the game by using proscribed means to reach the prelusory goal. Because the cheat is not following the limiting and often arbitrary rules of the game in order to achieve the goal, the cheat does not take on the lusory attitude and is not actually playing the game. Second is the *trifler*. The trifler is someone who follows the rules of the game but is not actually trying to reach the goal of the game. Think of a family sitting around a kitchen table playing a board game. Once the game begins, one member becomes engaged in a text message conversation and seems to lose interest in what happens in the game but continues to follow the rules, taking their turn when it arises, but doing so with newfound apathy. The trifler has no interest in reaching the goal and, therefore, reduces the challenge for the others to reach game goals. The trifler continues to take on the limiting game rules but does not attempt to reach the game goal, and therefore is not a *bona fide* game player.[14]

These stock characters, to Suits, are frauds. They seem like game players but actually are not because they do not take on the lusory attitude. Game players, he argues, are only those engaged in an activity with a goal and rules that limit the means available to reach the goal, and who accept the limiting or arbitrary conditions of the rules and the goal in order for the activity to occur. Thus, his final definition of game playing:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules, 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].[15]

He also offers a "simpler" definition: "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles."[16] Game playing, to Suits, is nothing more and nothing less.

Games and Play

Suits's definition is not universally accepted, but it is well known in sport philosophy circles and remains the starting point for most philosophical forays into this topic. One of the criticisms Suits receives is in response to his depiction of the relationship between play and games. For all of the depth and precision in Suits's essentialist endeavor, he uses the term *game playing*—an amalgamation of two different concepts—as that which he actually defines.[17]

Many sport philosophers, including Suits, have delineated between play and games as distinct but compatible phenomena. Play is more universal and more fundamental.[18] All people play. All animals play. Play is marked by one's ability to be distracted, to veer off course, to be diverted from the necessities of life. Suits, despite his use of the consolidated term *game playing*, does not reduce the two concepts into one. Instead, he depicts the relationship between play and games on a Venn diagram: each can be experienced on its own[19] or they can be experienced together.[20] His Grasshopperian views on the ideal of existence fit within the overlapping section of the diagram.

While Suits is far from the only scholar to offer a definition of play, he did so believing that there is much less philosophically interesting about play than games. Yet because play is such a ubiquitous concept, he felt the need to propose his own essentialist interpretation of it, which is much less prominent than his efforts on games. Suits

defines play with two necessary conditions. First, it must be autotelic. Something is autotelic when it engages as an end in itself. Autotelic activities are those in which the end or reward is in the doing. This is in contrast to exotelic activities, in which the end or reward is outside the actual activity. Going for a jog in an attempt to lose weight is exotelic. Going for a jog because one enjoys running is autotelic. Second, and more controversially, Suits argues that play is a reallocation of resources from instrumental to intrinsic purposes. He provides an example: when a young child is served a lump of mashed potatoes for dinner it is for an instrumental purpose—nourishment. However, when the child creates lakes and rivers with a spoon and the gravy, this is a reallocation from instrumental to intrinsic purposes.[21]

Suits's example is not perfect, and it exposes his definition to possible criticisms. We use it for this article because it highlights two core features of play: first, its autotelicity or intrinsic value; and second, that play may take any number of forms. One might play at games, for instance, or one might play with one's food.

Games, Play, and Value

After learning from Suits's Grasshopper, the disciples Skepticus and Prudence are content to say that when one is at play, one is living well—the best life, even. This thesis hearkens back to Aristotle's claim that intrinsically valued activity is better than extrinsically valued activity. Plato espoused a similar but more specific claim, arguing that the "right way of living" is "as play."[22] Play often figures prominently within philosophical conceptions of the good life, the ideal of existence.

Christian theologians have been hesitant to promote play in this way until relatively recently. In fact, theologians espousing play throughout much of history often did so cautiously or in contradiction to prevailing ideologies. Renowned lay theologian G. K. Chesterton offered no such subtlety, arguing provocatively, and like Plato, "that the true object of all human life is play."[23] Gerard Manley Hopkins, a nineteenth-cen

poet and priest, did the same when he wrote, "Christ plays in ten thousand places."[24] Christ is a consummate player, then Christians would do well to follow.

More recently, theologian and pastor Brian Edgar has elaborated on the mission of following Christ: "Play is part of the redemptive *mission* of the church in that a playful spirituality…[is] intrinsic to the process of the transformation of the world."[25] Edgar admits the importance of redeeming the fallen world, doing kingdom-building work to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and support the needy. Thus, a basic Christian objection to play being the ideal of existence is that there is worthy work to be done. Christ left a fallen world, and any Christian would feel some call to carry on Christ's work. Stereotypical views of the Puritan work ethic or Calvinism more broadly perpetuate this viewpoint. Calvinist theologian Lewis Smedes acknowledges as much, noting that "a few Calvinist doctrines… have buttressed an unplayful attitude toward life." However, even in an American Calvinist ideology that harvests such a serious and unplayful view of life, Smedes argues that a Christian should live playfully. "Smuggled into the theology of undialectical seriousness," he writes, is "a message of grace that invites us to look at our serious and unplayful world with a playful eye."[26] Smedes's support of play parallels Edgar's in saying that there is work to be done, but we should live playfully. Many other theologians have written even more extensively in this way throughout the last half century.[27]

While Christian communities have often needed convincing or at least approval to believe that play is the ideal of existence, Suits takes it as a philosophical truism. His views are not Christian, but they are eschatological. He engages in a thought project considering the conditions of an ideal world he calls Utopia.[28] An ideal world would be one in which all needs are met. What would one do in such an existence? Skepticus and Prudence intuitively suggest that play is the answer: we would engage in autotelic activities within loving and supportive community. This response comes immediately and naturally. In Utopia, where one's needs are and always will be met, the things that Utopians would do are intrinsically valuable or done for their own sake. Skepticu Prudence are confident of this. Utopians would fill their days at play, doing whatever

they love. The Grasshopper believes that this is accurate but not sufficient to describe *the* ideal of existence. Instead, the Grasshopper believes that while Utopians would play out their days in Utopia, they would be best served not just to play but to play games. Suits, via the Grasshopper, argues that game play would be the best kind of play—*the* ideal of existence. Suits's assertion that game playing constitutes the life most worth living—the ideal of existence—is provocative. It is among his most controversial because, as sport philosopher Doug McLaughlin describes, it is only "introductory and suggestive," unlike his thorough efforts to define games.[29] Briefly put, Suits has only asserted this claim; he has not offered much support for it.

Standard Value vs. Greater Value

Suits, via Skepticus and Prudence, gives voice to the commonly held notion that play constitutes the core of the good life. Play's autotelicity means that we do it for its own sake, thus showing our freedom, autonomy, and love. This is living well. And games, if undertaken by choice, thereby invoking play, are one way in which we can live the good life. Suits acknowledges that game play and non-game play both seem to have some claim on the ideal of existence. This is what we call the Standard Value Thesis—that game play and non-game play constitute the life most worth living, the ideal of existence. As such, games as conceived by Suits share in the ideal of existence with play activities that are not games (things like vacationing in Florida, playing the piano, engaging in deep conversation, or reading a novel).

When Suits argues that game playing is more valuable than non-game play, however, he enters territory into which very few have been willing to follow. A life of game playing is a good life, many willingly recognize, but not necessarily *the* good life—*the* life most worth living, *the* ideal of existence—as Suits argues. McLaughlin offers questions:

> Why..would [Suits] choose games to the near exclusion of other intrinsically satis activities? Why football over reading a good book? Why Sudoku over lounging around

> in the sun? Suits' preference of games over other intrinsically valued activities has led many critics to question whether Suits has not exaggerated the significance of games in his Utopian thesis.[30]

To differentiate between the more readily accepted Standard Value Thesis and what Suits argues—that a life of game playing constitutes *the* ideal of existence—we are going to call Suits's argument the Greater Value Thesis. Suits argues that:

> Play is necessary but not sufficient adequately to account for the ideal of existence….Game playing performs a crucial role in delineating that ideal—a role which cannot be performed by any other activity, and without which an account of the ideal (of human existence) is either incomplete or impossible.[31]

The search we are undertaking is to determine how Christians might navigate the differences between the Greater and Standard Value Theses. Suits proposes that game play is qualitatively better than non-game play, but it is only a suggestion. He has not provided enough argumentation to make the Greater Value Thesis widely accepted or even acceptable. Suits's deepest argument for the Greater Value Thesis a*ctually seems to be his conception of Utopia*. "Suits…never seriously defended his vision of good living," notes sport philosopher Scott Kretchmar.[32]

Suits's Utopia and the Greater Value Thesis

Suits's Utopia is "a state of existence where all activities are valued solely for themselves, where no striving of any kind is required, where, thanks to the total implementation of computerized automation, anything anyone could ever desire is immediately available without effort."[33] The key concept here is the last phrase. Anything done longhand could be done with the press of a button, and therefore would only be done for the experience rather than for what it produces. A Utopian could spend all day cooking delicious five-course dinners, but the same delectable cuisine could appear immediately from the snap of one's fingers. A Utopian could

spend months or years in an engineering lab creating a human flying device, but the same technology could appear with the clap of one's hands. The process of doing anything in Utopia with any effort is either unnecessary or without optimal efficiency, just like the gratuitous nature of games in Suits's definition.

McLaughlin provides some support for the Greater Value Thesis that Suits has, at best, only implied. He indicates that only game play provides "those 'just right' problems that people need in order to have something meaningful and interesting to do."[34] In essence, he argues that game play provides meaningful challenges in an existence without natural challenges. Eating lavish meals is enjoyable, a play activity that one might choose in Utopia. Spending vast amounts of time cooking lavish meals in Utopia when they could be provided technologically in an instant, means that one is doing something gratuitously. Simply eating the meals, McLaughlin would argue, will not be as meaningful because there is no problem to it. Preparing the feast, because it involves challenges (Can I use the right amount of the ingredients? Did I mix them well enough? Have I cooked it appropriately?), therefore provides more meaningfully engaging action.

Sport philosopher Deb Vossen also offers further context and support, speculating that newcomers to Utopia would engage in play activities like "traveling around the world, loafing in the sun, eating, drinking, dancing, singing, playing the trombone, and the like" before tiring of these activities done simply for the fun of it and consequently turning toward game play.[35] To be clear, these activities could be done as games if, for instance, Utopians were to race around the world, sit in the sun to see who can tan the best, or try to play a trombone song as well as or better than the original composer. Vossen's argument is that game play—trombone competitions or travel races in Utopia—is more durable than non-game play. And since Utopians have unlimited time, durability would be an important characteristic.

The arguments of meaningfulness and durability that Vossen and McLaughlin of provide a first line of defense for the Greater Value Thesis—they ask us not to dismiss

it without further inspection. Yet scholars have been unwilling or unable to fully support it. Conversely, critics also seem unwilling or unable to fully refute its core principle. There is something captivating about it, even if its logic seems out of reach. Most critiques of the Greater Value Thesis actually end up as nothing more than arguments against Suits's conception of Utopia.The arguments of meaningfulness and durability that Vossen and McLaughlin offer provide a first line of defense for the Greater Value Thesis—they ask us not to dismiss it without further inspection. Yet scholars have been unwilling or unable to fully support it. Conversely, critics also seem unwilling or unable to fully refute its core principle. There is something captivating about it, even if its logic seems out of reach. Most critiques of the Greater Value Thesis actually end up as nothing more than arguments against Suits's conception of Utopia.[36] What sense are we to make of his Utopia? Why would non-game play be less meaningful to a Utopian than game play? Would this be the case for all Utopians? What sense are we to make of his Utopia? Why would non-game play be less meaningful to a Utopian than game play? Would this be the case for all Utopians?

Suits is after the ideal of existence. He created Utopia simply for explora-tion. The basis of his Utopia is that if all our needs were met, what would we do? A Christian might answer that we would simply be in loving community with others. Indeed, first thoughts of heaven or humanity before the fall often stagnate with eternal redundancy, people sitting around doing nothing because nothing besides love and community would matter.[37] That is fine, Suits might answer (and he might even agree), but what would one do for all of eternity? We are, after all, purposeful creatures here on earth. "Life which is made meaningful by purposes and goals must find the vision of heaven terrible, since that vision only invites infinite and purposeless boredom," theologian Jürgen Moltmann argues provocatively.[38] If we did nothing, we would be bored and boring. What do humans do to alleviate boredom? The answer speaks to the ideal of existence. And for Suits, the answer is playing games. But the assumptions implicit in his deduction require some discussion.

Kierkegaard's Aesthete on Boredom

Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings caught Suits's eye. The Danish philosopher's Aesthete asserts that "boredom is the root of all evil."[39] Suits cites this and alters it slightly but significantly, saying, "Boredom is the mother of all play."[40] Boredom, for Suits, is the fundamental reason why we play and why we play games. "It is very curious," the Aesthete explains, "that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion." He continues: "All who are bored cry out for change."[41] Suits agrees.[42] So have many others. Literary critic Roger Caillois, a well-cited scholar of games and play, suggests that games are "a kind of makeshift device intended to allay boredom."[43]

The Aesthete describes two separate ways to alleviate boredom using an analogy of rotating the crops. The first and lesser option is to "continually" change the soil.[44] "One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city. One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold." This represents "a fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star," a method which "cancels itself and is the spurious infinity."[45] The futility of this novelty-seeking boredom alleviation method relates to the arguments Vossen and McLaughlin make in support of the Greater Value Thesis. Play in the form of seeking novelty, like a newcomer to Utopia would, is like continuously changing the soil, and it is not as durable or meaningful as game play. One can travel the world or bask at the water's edge on a tropical beach and then travel to another exotic locale and then another. But then what? The Aesthete calls this "the boundless infinity of change" that is "based on an illusion."[46] The illusion is that one can and will always find something new and stimulating when previous stimulation has lost its novelty and, therefore, attraction. But novelty, according to the Aesthete, always seems to boomerang back to boredom.

The Aesthete juxtaposes continuously changing the soil with a more interesting method of rotating the crops: "The method I propose does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation the kinds of crops."[47] As such, he pushes for intensity of experience rather than

extensity, not looking for novelty but seeing the same thing in a new way—nuance. Game playing fits this description: doing the same activities, but with subtle variations in each instantiation of them. Caillois describes game playing in this way as "the primitive desire to find diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually recurrent obstacles."[48] One might allay boredom by playing golf on the same course every day or regularly playing chess against the same opponent. Each experience would be different in nuanced ways based on differing conditions, strategies, or performance. In this method, the Aesthete identifies the importance of arbitrary limitations that one places on oneself as a best practice to avoid boredom. "The more a person limits (oneself)," he declares, "the more resourceful (that person) becomes."[49] The more resourceful one is, the less bored one will be. If one wants to shoot par in a round of golf, one could continually seek new (and easier) courses. Or, one could limit oneself to a particularly favorite or local course that will require great resourcefulness in order to reach the goal.

Limitation is that which forces us to become resourceful, and resourceful people are not boring. Resourceful people are more play-capable than those who are not. And a resourceful person often becomes such because of limitations. Related to this is the Aesthete's principle of arbitrariness. "One does not enjoy the immediate object," he declares, "but something else that one arbitrarily introduces."[50] Being in possession of the opponent's queen has no value outside of chess. But it connotes a great deal of power in chess, an important sub-goal in an arbitrarily contrived convention. The Aesthete explains the principle in this way: "Something accidental is made into the absolute and as such into an object of absolute admiration." And this, he adds, "is an excellent means of stimulation."[51]

Idleness and Boredom

What stimulates us keeps us from boredom. In the absence of natural problems—the conditions of Suits's Utopia, or Eden before the fall, for that matter—what would do all day long and every day for eternity? Boredom, according to both Kierkegaard's

Aesthete and Suits, would emerge and should be avoided.[52] And yet they differ in thei understanding of idleness. The Aesthete sees boredom and idleness as representative of extremely different approaches.[53] Boredom is "the root of evil"; idleness "is by no means a root of evil; on the contrary, it is a truly divine life, if one is not bored."[54] The Aesthete seems to be referring to idleness as stillness, the absence of busyness, or being at peace when inactive or not busy—something like *shalom*. "Idleness, then, is so far from being the root of evil that it is rather the true good. Boredom is the root of evil; it is that which must be held off."[55] This may be a mere semantic distinction he makes, but in doing so, he alludes to Christian teleology and aligns himself with another well-known scholar who is also a Christian.

"I have discovered," declares the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, "that all the unhappiness of (people) arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."[56] Pascal argues that humans are not capable of idleness, even though if they had the capacity to "stay quietly in their own chamber" they would be eternally happy. He argues that humans have a "feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely."[57] This Christian view of the human fallen condition, Pascal argues, makes us unable to attain peace. Instead, we seek diversion. He explains that "(Humans) have a secret instinct which impels them to seek amusement and occupation…and which arises from the sense of their constant unhappiness."[58] We are naturally unhappy in our mortal condition. We are always striving for something, always seeking something new, always comparing, always worrying about our concerns. Pascal continues: "(Humans) have another secret instinct, a remnant of the greatness of our original nature, which teaches them that happiness in reality consists only in rest, and not in stir." Rest is that which happened on the seventh day of creation. It is the sabbath, biblically mandated, that which occurs regularly. Pascal argues that we are right to seek rest, but we do so in a peculiar way.

> Of these two contrary instincts [people] form within themselves a confused idea, which hides itself from their view in the depths of their soul, inciting them to aim at

> rest through excitement, and always to fancy that the satisfaction which they have nc
> will come to them, if, by surmounting whatever difficulties confront them, they can thereby open the door to rest.[59]

In order to alleviate this confused idea, we seek diversions. Our days are filled with distractions that keep us from our own sordid thoughts. These diversions become occupations. We seek to fill our free time occupied with evermore diversionary pursuits.

Pascal laments this state of affairs, which he believes constitutes the current fallen condition of humanity, our sinful nature. He elaborates: "[People] are given cares and business which make them bustle about from break of day.—It is…a strange way to make them happy! What more could be done to make them miserable?—Indeed! What could be done? We should only have to relieve them from all these cares."[60] We should seek to have our miserable cares taken away. As such, an existence defined by peace and joy await. But Pascal believes that we err by seeking distraction from our natural problems with further problems so we can ignore the original problems. Instead, he suggests that we should seek stillness, idleness, the absence of busy-ness, and not constant diversion.

Kierkegaard's Aesthete, Pascal, and Suits are not aligned in their ideals. Suits starts from the point of idleness, but does not separate it from boredom. In Utopia, one would be sitting in one's Pascalian "chamber," idiomatically speaking, without natural problems. Suits sees this as a sub-optimal state of affairs. Pascal agrees that we are not capable of experiencing peace or joy while all alone with our thoughts. But he and the Aesthete suggest that joy in idleness (stillness), despite our fallen human nature, is that for which we should aim. And the Aesthete offers principles for how to be more content when bored—be resourceful within one's limitations, and creatively ascribe relative ultimacy to things that are arbitrary. This view encourages the diversion that Pascal laments theoretically (and theologically), even though the latter knows practically why we so embrace it. Pascal is pessimistic about the ability to achieve tne

human ideal of idleness; the Aesthete believes diversions can help us achieve idleness. Suits wants to avoid idleness.

Suits differs in that he prioritizes agency. When bored, idle, or still, Suits argues that one should engage in game playing. This builds on Kierkegaard's encouragement to create arbitrary meaningfulness within one's limitations. In Suits's Utopia—and with the Greater Value Thesis—there is no utility, instrumentality, or natural problems, interpersonal or otherwise. Therefore, when Suits argues that game playing is the ideal of existence, he has a lot of explaining to do about that existence, because non-utopian (normal, actual, worldly) game playing is rife with conflict, immorality, interpersonal problems, utility, and instrumentality. Suits's Utopia would have no need for morality or judgment of behavior because morality is irrelevant in a perfect existence and poor behavior would not exist in Utopia; and nothing could be gained from production within Utopian games because everything would have already been acquired or achieved (or acquirable or achievable without effort).[61]

Game playing, according to Suits, is the ideal of existence because it is "activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end."[62] In this, Suits dismisses Pascal's pessimistic views on diversions as instruments. Games are distractions that alleviate boredom and are therefore instruments. But when one plays a game, the game is an instrument for the player to experience an activity that is intrinsically valuable, a consequence Pascal acknowledges but does not value. The Aesthete acknowledges the value of intrinsically motivated diversions. His principles of limitation and arbitrariness apply in such endeavors and reveal the importance of the concept of striving in games.

Striving and Theology

When Suits says that game playing is the ideal of existence because it is "activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically

valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end,"[63] th crucial idea from a theological perspective is that game players strive. In Utopia (or other conceptions of the ideal of existence), one would have no need to strive for anything instrumentally. To strive for something means that one desires something that one does not have. A striver is incomplete, unfulfilled. But in the ideal of existence, one would be complete, having no need to strive. Yet game players must necessarily strive toward the game goal. So how can game playing be the ideal of existence? This is a major concern within Suits's Utopia: how can games be the ideal of existence when game players strive to win and the act of striving indicates incompletion and unfulfillment?

The root of all bad things that happen within and alongside games comes from the fact that everyone tries to win but only one person or team can actually attain victory. Thus, games create losers, or at least those who did not reach the goal and therefore failed. How do we reconcile game playing with this inherent problem? The simplest answer is that we should diminish our focus on winning. The problems in games are not a product of winning *per se* but the overemphasis on or inflation of game results. This is a fine line to walk. Too little emphasis on game results makes games trifling matters that easily become dull and boring, negating the original reason to play games —to alleviate boredom. Yet too much emphasis on game results is a real concern when considering games to be the ideal of existence. When one strives to win as the only or at least overarching aim, the game becomes an instrument to attain victory and all its spoils. Any existence in which the spoils of victory matter is not an ideal existence. Theologian Brian Edgar suggests provocatively that "it is much better to play to love rather than to win."[64] To connect this with Suits, we might say: instead of striving to win games, we should strive to love others in games. Suits would dismiss the suggestion that we should not play games to win, but playing games to love may actually align with Suits's ultimate aim.

Overemphasis on game results is a consequence of our incomplete, fallen nature. can enter games for any number of reasons. If we enter them striving to prove

something to others about ourselves or to attain something that is and will be central to our identity, we are overemphasizing. When one enters a game with a need to win, the underlying tenet is that one needs to win in order to be something or become something—a champion, a winner, the best, the better, and so on. This reveals that the competitor is not currently in a state of being with which one is comfortable—Pascal's lament. The competitor enters a game striving for something that one does not have. It is the striving or the longing for attainment of particular game results or something that those results do or say that pollutes games. And this is different from striving to win.

Theologian Robert Ellis makes the connection between sport and the concept of *Christus Victor*: Christ the winner.[65] This lens might help us make sense of striving and Suits's Greater Value Thesis from a Christian perspective. God has won through Jesus Christ by bringing the world back to himself, *Christus Victor*. What does game playing as the possible ideal of existence mean for Christians? Game players overemphasize game results when the results will become central to their identity or provide something for them that they desire. A Christian might and should view game results a bit differently. God has already won. Indeed, through Christ, God has won the ultimate victory, and nothing else really matters. Moltmann argues that, on first glance, this can cause despair ("It's all *for nothing*"). But the believer rejoices "in the grace which he can have for nothing and [hopes] for a new world in which all is available and may be had for nothing" ("It's really all f*or nothing*") (emphasis original). "The cross of Christ," Moltmann contends, "makes possible the new game of freedom."[66] If a Christian engages rightly as a game player, game results will matter only as concluding the experience, but beyond that, it is all for nothing. The game player can do nothing to earn Christ's victory, it is given freely. This takes pressures off the results of game play. We have what we need.

If it is all for nothing because of Christus Victor, why would we engage in game play? This question gets at the heart of Suits's Greater Value Thesis. He believes that g playing represents the ideal of human existence because games provide artificial

challenges that give us meaningful activity in the absence of natural problems. When we are living in the ideal existence—one in which it is all for nothing—what would we do with our time? For Suits, the best thing we could do is play games in which we try to win without striving for extrinsic benefits of game results. In other words, game playing gives us something to strive for in an existence in which it is all for nothing—something to strive for in which the experience matters but the result has no effect. Suits characterizes games as activities "in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable," that is, the game features activity that we intrinsically enjoy, "and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end."[67]The ideal way to play games is to strive to win, and it is the striving that really matters rather than the outcome.[68] A Christian would have no need for further end in the ideal of existence because it is all for nothing. This would allow us to focus on the intrinsic value derived from game playing, the joy of striving.

Suits identifies residents in Utopia as experiencing something like Alexander the Great did, "when there are no more worlds to conquer."[69] We might say the same of the ideal of existence. This is a magnificent allusion because it speaks to so much of what makes games valuable that we so often ignore. For the Christian, the ideal of existence is an Alexandrian condition. Games provide pre-Alexandrian experiences within an Alexandrian condition. Games are for nothing. Because we strive, we infuse games with meaningfulness, but their results are for nothing. A Christian need not strive for anything, and yet games allow us to experience striving.

Moltmann considers this "end" of humanity to be "altogether different" from what we experience here and now. Yet it is also "a return to patterns and relationships taken from (the) 'aesthetic existence'" that Kierkegaard espoused. This implies that the ideal of existence is a return to the foundations of the human experience, redeemed for eternity. "The relation of this life … to eternal life," Moltmann asserts, "is not (as) a struggle but preplay."[70]

Conclusion

Games provide unique opportunities for game players each time they enter the experience. That is the aesthetic existence of games. Good games can never be fully conquered. There is always more to do or more to be done better, and it is existentially futile. Good games represent a condition not defined by struggle but as preplay. That is the beauty of game play: it can always be enjoyable and/or satisfying, yet it can never be conquered—at least the "really magnificent games"[71] that Suits had in mind for Utopia. If we take this mindset into games—that we are complete through Christus Victor, that games are non-ultimate experiences in which the value is in the striving itself, and that we enjoy loving community while doing so—game playing could very well be the ideal of existence. Playing games knowing that they are activities that do not have ultimate significance allows us to center ourselves in that which is ultimate while also experiencing meaningful activity. It allows us to strive as if something is at stake in activities we find intrinsically valuable, all the while knowing that it is all for nothing—a freeing rather than despondent declaration.

We can envision a Christian living the ideal of existence playing games in loving community with others trying to win but knowing that the outcome of the game has no instrumental effect because it is all for nothing. Nothing a game player does will ever change that. Everything takes on less importance. Everything would be "just a game," then, to use the phrase colloquially. Maybe that is what Suits is really arguing: anything and everything we would do in our current existence is "just a game" in that it is "preplay" toward the ultimate reality. Indeed, having security in Christ allows one to enter into game playing just as Suits imagines it to be: to strive in an experience that is intrinsically valuable, and without need for anything the experience produces.

Cite this article

Chad Carlson and Brian R. Bolt, "Grasshopper Theology: Games, Play, and the Ideal of Existence", *Christian Scholar's Review*, 50:4 , 363-381

Footnotes

Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 1978 ↩

Ibid., ix-x. ↵

Suits actually has four necessary and sufficient conditions: goals, means, rules, and the lusory attitude. For the sake of brevity in this description (and following the lead of other sport philosophers in their summaries), we have combined means and rules because of their close relationship. ↵

Lusory is Suits' choice of derivate from the Latin *ludus*, meaning "games." ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 37. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Ibid., 37-38. ↵

Naismith's original rules did not specifically exclude behaviors using the words we have, but his intent was to do so. ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 32. ↵

Theologian Lewis Smedes noticed the unique nature of game rules, stating: "Part of the freedom of play is the freedom to make rules that do not apply to ordinary life, rules that seem very hard to understand for those not in the game." Lewis Smedes, "Theology and the Playful Life," in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*, eds. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 52. ↵

R. Scott Kretchmar, "Why Do We Care So Much About Mere Games? (And Is This Ethically Defensible?)" Quest 57.2 (2005): 186. ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 37-38. ↵

Ibid., 38-39. ↵

Ibid., 45-47. ↵

Ibid., 41. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Chad Carlson, "The 'Playing' Field: Attitudes, Activities, and the Conflation of Play and Games," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38.1 (2011): 74-87. ↵

R. Scott Kretchmar, "The Normative Heights and Depths of Play," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34.1 (2007): 1-12. ↵

Examples of non-play game experiences are less intuitive than non-game play experiences. Of the former, Suits would suggest, for instance, that a professional tennis player may at times participate in a game but not play. There may be times in which the tennis player does not want to play but has to because it

job. In such an example, she is not at play. But since she still participates in tennis matches even absent the play spirit, she continues to undertake the lusory attitude and therefore remains a game player. ↵

Bernard Suits, "Venn and the Art of Category Maintenance," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 31.1 (2004): 1-14. ↵

Bernard Suits, "Words on Play," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 4.1 (1977): 117-131. ↵

Plato, *Laws*, 803-804. ↵

G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 40. ↵

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 54, as cited in Brian Edgar, *The God Who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 31. ↵

Edgar, *The God Who Plays*, 103. ↵

Smedes, "Theology of a Playful Life," 55. ↵

See Sam Keen, *To a Dancing God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Robert E. Neale, I*n Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); and Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). ↵

Suits's choice of a generic utopia allows him to create conditions to serve his purposes. ↵

Douglas W. McLaughlin, "Reinventing the Wheel: On Games and the Good Life" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 18. ↵

Ibid., 87. ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 166. ↵

2R. Scott Kretchmar, "The Intelligibility of Suits's Utopia: The View from Anthropological Philosophy," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33.1 (2006): 72. ↵

Bernard Suits, "Games and Utopia: Posthumous Reflections," *Simulation & Games* 15.1 (1984): 8-9. ↵

McLaughlin, "Reinventing the Wheel," 44. ↵

Deborah P. Vossen, "Utopia is Intelligible and Game-Playing is What Makes Utopia Intelligible," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43.2 (2016): 257. ↵

The vast majority of voices within this discourse have been published in issues of the Journal of the *Philosophy of Sport* and the *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy journal.* ↵

Our representation of Suits's arguments may make his views sound individualistic. This is not the case. Fo Suits, game playing is conventional, created by and for humans just like language. Game play is meant to be relational and to further community.38Jürgen Moltmann, "The First Liberated Men in Creation," in *Theology of Play*, eds. Jürgen Moltmann, Robert E. Neale, Sam Keen, & David LeRoy Miller (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 34. ↵

Jürgen Moltmann, "The First Liberated Men in Creation," in *Theology of Play*, eds. Jürgen Moltmann, Robert E. Neale, Sam Keen, & David LeRoy Miller (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 34. ↵

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*: *Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 285. Philosopher Andreas Elpidorou mentions that many of the Aesthete's arguments are egotistic and hedonistic, thus not aligning with Christian virtue. Indeed, when the Aesthete argues that boredom is the root of all evil, this is not a moral argument but an aesthetic one that seems compatible with Christian virtue. And yet, Elpidorou takes this argument to be meaningful in a different way: "Somehow, such a broad and unconditional assertion manages to capture many of the lessons we've learned in the last thirty years from the scientific study of boredom proneness (and mental health)." Andreas Elpidorou, *Propelled: How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead us to the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 47. ↵

Bernard Suits, "The Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport," *Journal of the Philosophy of Spor*t 15.1 (1988): 5. ↵

Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 286, 292. ↵

Suits, "The Tricky Triad," 5. ↵

Roger Caillois, Man, *Play and Games,* trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2001), 31. ↵

4Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 291.The Aesthete admits, "There might seem to be some ambigu-ity in this phrase … But the farmer does not use the expression in this way. For a moment, however, I will use it in this way to discuss the rotation of crops that depends upon the boundless infinity of change, its extensive dimension." ↵

Ibid. ↵

Ibid. ↵

7Ibid., 292. ↵

Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 32-33. ↵

Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 292. ↵

Ibid., 299. ↵

Ibid., 299-300. ↵

It should be noted that when Kierkegaard says this, he is talking about human nature rather than making an eschatological claim. Suits is making an eschatological claim. ↵

3William McDonald, "Kierkegaard's Demonic Boredom," in *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, eds. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 2009), 61-84. McDonald discusses Kierkegaard's analysis of "demonic boredom," a second-order form of boredom more inclined towards the spiritual vice of acedia. While we do not make the connection to acedia, we see boredom as Kierkegaard does as a social problem—or at least rather a problem with social solutions. ↵

Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 289. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), 52. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Ibid., 54. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Ibid., 58. ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 168-170. ↵

Ibid., 172. ↵

Ibid. ↵

Edgar, The God Who Plays, 57. ↵

5Robert Ellis, The Games People Play (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 219-227. Ellis uses this description to imply cosmic victory of good over evil (*Deus Victor*) and Christ as a competitor defeating evil forces for all time (*Christus Victor*). We are using the term more towards a theology of grace, that because of the cross, God's grace has overcome and is universal. ↵

6Moltmann, "The First Liberated Men," 32-33. ↵

Suits, The Grasshopper, 172. ↵

Sport philosopher J. S. Russell has argued that striving is a moral virtue in "Striving, Entropy, and Meaning

Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 47.3 (2020): 419-437. ↵

Suits, *The Grasshopper,* 172. ↵

Moltmann, "The First Liberated Man," 35. ↵

Suits, "Games and Utopia," 23. ↵

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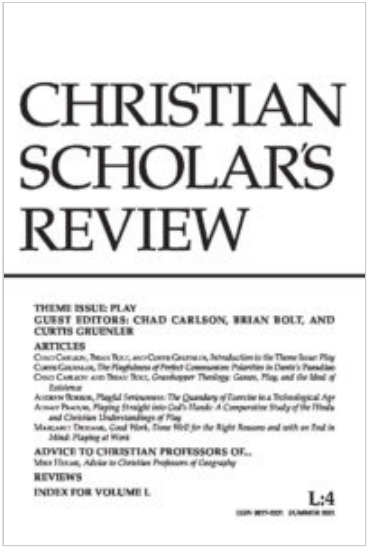

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