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Reconsidering *The Grasshopper*: On the Reception of Bernard Suits in Game Studies

by Liam Mitchell

Abstract

Bernard Suits can be counted alongside the likes of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois as one of the progenitors of game studies. His landmark book, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, is rigorous but playful, offering a series of definitions, parables and puzzles on its way to a quixotic conclusion concerning the relationship of play to the good life. While it is cited in early works important to the field, it is less frequently cited than one might expect; moreover, these citations are rarely substantive, often remaining restricted to his definition of gameplay as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." This paper responds to this general disregard by highlighting the productive ambiguities of the text, particularly with regard to the relationship between games and society. As a transparently, reflectively Socratic dialogue, *The Grasshopper* works not only by mounting a discourse in which interlocutors arrive at a series of rigorous definitions, but by inviting the reader to read between the lines. *The Grasshopper* is rewarding not because it establishes apparently universal truths, but because it situates these truths in social context. The text is therefore useful for anyone concerned with the social or political dimensions of games. To demonstrate this utility, this paper responds to two recent works in game studies that take Suits more seriously than most (Tulloch, 2014; Boluk and Lemieux, 2017), conducts a close reading of the generally neglected sixth chapter of the book, and offers some concluding observations on the political relationship between games and society. In doing so, it aims to pull the attention of game studies scholars away from the far too portable definition of gameplay and deeper into a complex and socially relevant book.

Keywords: Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, culture, definition, game studies, *The Grasshopper*, politics, social context, Bernard Suits, Rowan Tulloch

Introduction

Bernard Suits is known best in the field of game studies for his definition of gameplay as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (2014, p. 43). When an author wants to define games or play, they can line Suits up alongside the likes of Johan Huizinga (1950) and Roger Caillois (1961), and then come up with a definition of their own (e.g. Karhulahti, 2015; Juul, 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

While scholars of course routinely build on one another's work, the ways that scholars in game studies have mobilized Suits's definition are not always unproblematic. With Suits, the first problem concerns quotation. When authors take a piece of text from the page on which it was written, they both abandon the rest of the text and risk giving readers the impression that the quotation can stand on its own. But text, of course, always appears in context, which is rarely insignificant for reader reception. Salen and Zimmerman, close readers of Suits, note this problem explicitly: "[i]n simplifying complex ideas to a grid of common elements, much of the context and subtlety of the authors' ideas is clearly lost" (2004, p. 79).

The second problem concerns definition, and particularly the definitions of games and play. Definitions often aspire to universality, giving the impression that they apply always and everywhere, even if this is only rarely the case. Moreover, definition itself is a foundationally political act: definitions give structure to the parts of the world that they define, dividing what is normal and acceptable from what is abnormal and illegitimate [1]. This is the case in culture just as surely as in law or code (Lessig, 1999). When authors define games and play in one way, they necessarily refuse or fail to define them in another. This can exclude or delegitimize whole modalities of game design and play, relegating games to the status of "interactive media," "toys," "hobbies," "puzzles," and so on [2].

These first points on quotation and definition highlight the relationship between games and society, broadly construed -- a relationship of obvious importance for Huizinga and Caillois, who join "the play element" to "culture" and "man" to "play and games," but of less obvious importance for Suits, whose formalist concerns seem to disengage him from social ones. As an analytical philosopher writing in an explicitly Socratic style, Suits appears to be devoted to constructing the sorts of definitions that can be carried across time and space without regard for cultural norms or political entanglements.

And this is indeed how his work has been received in game studies. While, to date, the phrase "Bernard Suits" appears 158 times in the two major journals of the philosophy of sport, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* and *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, it appears only 17 times in *Game Studies* and *Games and Culture*, and even fewer times in other journals in the field. This does not necessarily prove some sort of systematic neglect, however, since the philosophy of sport is of course a well-established and sizable field that has been reflecting on Suits's work more or less since its beginning (e.g. Paddick, 1979; McBride, 1979; Suits was in fact the President of the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport in the 1970s). Game Studies, on the other hand, is relatively new and comparatively small. But this argument from quantity, as it were, seems inadequate given the evidence from quality: much work on Suits in the philosophy of sport is sustained and critical, while much work in game studies is not. In the two major journals of game studies, Suits is usually mentioned only in passing (e.g. Aarseth, 2017; Dor, 2018; Guanio-Uluru, 2016; Järvinen, 2004; Pearce, 2007; Sicart, 2011; Tobin, 2012; Veale, 2012), or in more detail but only with reference to his definition of gameplay (e.g. Bateman, 2015; Lastowska, 2009). This neglect is, as Rockwell and Sinclair note, particularly pronounced in this very journal: "[s]trangely unimportant to *Game Studies* is Bernard Suits, a philosopher of sport who wrote… a charming dialogue that tries to define what a game is. Games don't play with sports" (2016, p. 219).

There are, of course, exceptions to this generally limited interest in Suits: both Karhulahti (2015) and Rockwell and Kee (2011) adopt the dialogical form of his most famous book; Fordyce (2015) makes reference to his concept of open or endless play; Harviainen, Brown and Suominen (2018) as well as Harviainen and Frank (2018) note his comparison of games and sex; O'Donnell (2014) praises the "messy" character of his understanding of play; and Tulloch (2014) engages in a lengthy critique of his understanding of the relationship between rules and power. Save the last, however, these exceptions prove the rule: they are brief engagements with limited aspects of Suits's work rather than sustained and critical ones that range beyond narrow segments of the text [3].

The reception of Suits's work in game studies is therefore limited -- and unfortunately so. In mentioning Suits only in passing, or by focusing on his definition of gameplay, game studies scholars tend to miss the subtlety of his work, and thereby its genuinely productive contributions to the long tradition of thought connecting games to society. This reception is as surprising as it is problematic, since Suits's definition of gameplay appears in a book tellingly titled *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (2014). *Games* are only important for Suits insofar as they relate to *life* and *Utopia* -- to something beyond themselves [4].

In this article, I make three general arguments. First, I argue that *The Grasshopper* provides a set of resources for thinking about the relationship between games and society, and that these resources will never be mobilized by readers who focus on the single chapter in which the definition of gameplay appears. Suits's most productive observations are found in ambiguous parables and playful asides. Second, then, I argue that *The Grasshopper* encourages a particular way of thinking, or at least a particular way of reading. Suits seems to be as interested in provoking his readers as in convincing them of the validity of his claims. Third, I argue that game studies as a field could benefit not only from a serious reconsideration of *The Grasshopper*, but from the adoption of this slower mode of thinking, reading and citing.

Here, I should note that I am not suggesting that this slower mode of thinking, reading and citing means philosophizing. Game studies scholars do not need to familiarize themselves with the expansive field of the philosophy of sport before presuming to reference Suits, as though only the Queen of the Sciences could properly comprehend the magnitude of his accomplishment. I am also explicitly not engaging in a literature review of that field, the sort of review that might catalogue all of the different possible things to be learned from a careful reading of *The Grasshopper*. That would be well beyond the scope of this article, and it can be found elsewhere anyway [5]. Rather, I am arguing that game studies scholars -- and particularly those game studies scholars who claim to be interested in the relationship between games and society -- need to appreciate one

particular thing about Suits: his work is *already* concerned with the relationship between games and society (or culture, or metagames, or life). It offers far more than seemingly apolitical definitions. As such, this article calls for a reconsideration of Suits within game studies not on the basis of the insights that might be drawn from another field, but on the basis of a close reading of the text itself.

To make my case, I will focus on the story of Ivan and Abdul, two retired generals whose exploits are detailed by the two primary characters of *The Grasshopper* in its sixth chapter. The parable resonates with political overtones, and contains a critique of the very sort of universalizing rationality of which Suits is sometimes accused. I will also briefly outline Suits's conception of Utopia in order to further demonstrate his complicated and situated understanding of rules and definitions. At the end of *The Grasshopper*, Suits presents a strange vision of an unproductive, game-filled future that collapses in on itself almost as soon as it is imagined. Where the parable of Ivan and Abdul can be understood as a critique of rationality, the vision of Utopia, ambivalent to the point of mysticism, is less readily interpreted but no less compelling.

But before entering the text itself, I will provide brief readings of two critical, sustained treatments of *The Grasshopper* in game studies. While the field is generally characterized by a disinterest in Suits or by passing mentions to limited aspects of his work, both Rowan Tulloch (2014) and Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux (2017) mount longer arguments, claiming that *The Grasshopper*'s restriction to bloodless definitions leads Suits to mischaracterize the relationship between games, culture and power. These two works are fairly unique in the field in that they focus on games and what might be broadly termed "the political" (Schmitt, 1996; Wiley, 2018), and in that they take Suits seriously. As such, they make an ideal starting point for a reconsideration of *The Grasshopper* in the field of game studies.

Tulloch on Rules and Power

Tulloch argues in *Games and Culture* that *The Grasshopper* "reflects a crucial understanding of rules [typical of game studies]: the assumption that rules operate through restriction" (2014, p. 338). This is a bad assumption, Tulloch contends, because rules do far more than simply restrict: in games, they produce particular types of actions, inform discourses that in turn inform how games are played and governed, and even help constitute players themselves. Rules, in short, should be understood as "a productive force" (2014, p. 336).

Insofar as rules index broader societal discourses, we should be able to think about the ways that rules operate in games through theoretical frameworks that describe "the operation of power in contemporary society" (2014, p. 337). Tulloch therefore turns to Michel Foucault in order to provide an account of the "productive," "constructive," or "constitutive" character of power. For Foucault, power is not (only) a thing that is possessed by someone, like a sword brandished to ensure compliance; rather, it is a force that shapes or conditions our understanding or experience of the world and what is possible within it. As discourse, it helps determine what is said, how it is said, under what conditions it is said, and with what effects. It produces not only the contents of speech but the modes of speech that govern utterances and the speakers who utter them. And, as discourse, it is exceedingly complicated, relating to a variety of institutions that help to shape speech, bodies, knowledges and pleasures.

Tulloch draws on the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990) for this account of constitutive power. There, Foucault takes pains to demonstrate the ways in which the Victorians were not "repressed" by the sexual mores of the times, refusing to speak of subjects deemed inappropriate for civilized company, but rather spoke *continually*, albeit *in particular ways* -- especially to the likes of doctors, in the terms of the clinic, and to priests, in the language of confession. There was an injunction to speak of the pleasures of the body, since then behaviours deemed deviant could be catalogued, understood and managed.

The discursive governance of the pleasures of the body aligns with the rule-based governance of the pleasures of the game. "What we find pleasurable we are least likely to see as an operation of power," Tulloch writes, but "this concept of pleasure is far from natural; power constructs what we find pleasurable, and simultaneously what we find pleasurable enables and reinforces certain structures of power" (2014, p. 345). When a player plays a game, they therefore engage in a discursive relationship with what Suits calls the "institution" of the game (2014, p. 50) or what Tulloch refers to as "a game world or a game's identity" (2014, p. 347): they play in the terms laid out by the rules, or they explore them, exploit them, ignore them, or build on them. They play in a discursive relationship with a set of rules, thereby informing the rules and being informed by them.

Tulloch's constitutive account of power in games is compelling, particularly in contrast to a purely restrictive understanding of rules.

In such a restrictive, "liberal humanist" understanding, rules place limits on player agency, removing the player's freedom and limiting their choices; players are separate from the games they play in the same way that individuals are separate from the societies in which they live, and both are rational agents (Tulloch, 2014, p. 342). Tulloch attributes this impoverished conception of player and human agency to both Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and to Suits (2014).

This is where Tulloch's account becomes less convincing. He begins with Suits's definition of gameplay and an illustration that Suits provides: the rules of a footrace are the only reason that players do not cut across the infield. They have an easier path to victory available, but they choose to run around an unnecessary obstacle. In Tulloch's reading of Suits, "rules stop the competitors achieving their goals by the easiest and most effective means"; they "deny free play"; they "function by means of limitation, exclusion, rejection, and negation" (2014, p. 338). Rules seem to be repressive. To apply this claim directly to Suits, Tulloch draws on Juul's (2005) critique of *The Grasshopper*, where Juul observes that "it would always be possible to set up a game using the most efficient means possible: a racing game where cutting over the infield was allowed" (p. 34). Tulloch agrees: games and rules cannot "be meaningfully understood by reference to a hypothetical, free activity" (2014, 339); they must be understood constitutively, as the enablers of play.

This is a bad criticism of Suits for two related reasons. First, cutting across an infield is not a "hypothetical free activity" that acts as the logical precedent for a game, but is rather a different sort of game: it is a short race rather than a long one, and it operates with its own rules -- say, that runners may not drive bicycles across the infield, or that they may not place bear traps to disable their opponents. Races by bicycle, or races involving hidden bear traps, would themselves be different sorts of games similarly susceptible to different forms of cheating. The existence of different sorts of games does not demonstrate that Suits, as Tulloch argues, is blind to the constitutive character of rules and power.

Indeed -- and this is the second reason that Tulloch's is a bad criticism -- Suits himself uses the term "constitutive" to describe rules. For Suits, "constitutive rules" do indeed "prohibit use of the most efficient means for reaching a prelusory goal" (2014, p. 40), which might make them sound "repressive," but they also enable play in the first place. They "circumscribe" an "area" of play; they "determine the kind and range of means which will be permitted in seeking to achieve the prelusory goal" (Suits, 2014, p. 39-40). Rules enable gameplay.

This claim about the constitutive character of rules should be combined with Suits's understanding of the "institution" of the game (2014, p. 50), which is to say all of the expansive elements of the game other than its constitutive rules and the goal that the players aim to achieve: the finish line, the track and the infield, the players, the spectators and so on. Suits explicitly acknowledges the different relations that players, triflers, cheats and spoilsports have both to the game understood only in terms of rules and goals and to the game-as-institution:

> triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals; and… while players acknowledge the claims of both the game and its institution, triflers and cheats acknowledge only institutional claims, and spoilsports acknowledge neither. (Suits, 2014, p. 51)

Echoing Huizinga's account of the difference between the cheat and the spoilsport -- that the cheat "collapses" the world, while the spoilsport "shatters" it (and thereby creates the possibility of making "a new community with rules of its own" (1950, pp. 11-12)) -- Suits thereby demonstrates a clear understanding of the situated, contextual and constitutive character of gameplay. Suits neither understands rules restrictively nor in isolation from their broader context.

Tulloch does not provide enough evidence to demonstrate that Suits is a "liberal humanist" with a "restrictive" conception of rules and power. Based on the evidence presented here, I would suggest that it would be more accurate to characterize Suits's understanding of rules in the Foucauldian terms that Tulloch prefers.

Boluk and Lemieux on Text and Context

If Tulloch's ultimate intention in insisting on Foucauldian terms for conceiving the relationship between games and power is "a new politics of gaming" (Tulloch, 2014, p. 348), then we might do well to look for the politics that are already present in the text. Boluk and Lemieux, whose work focuses solidly on this political register, conduct just such a reading of *The Grasshopper* in their *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (2017): concerned with the connection between the ludic and the social, their book offers a politically-minded critique of Suits that ranges beyond his definition of gameplay.

Before examining that critique, however, I want to describe a conference presentation given by Lemieux on behalf of both authors in 2017 memorably titled "Fuck Golf." He began by juxtaposing Suits with US President Donald Trump: just as Trump's golf swing can hypothetically be examined and critiqued on its own terms, removed from the social context from which it arose, so too can Suits's view on games be isolated. Lemieux's juxtaposition was not arbitrary, since Suits uses golf as a key illustration in the development of his definition of gameplay: while it would be more efficient to pick up the ball and drop it in the hole, players voluntarily choose the less efficient means, chipping at the ball with clubs (2014, p. 25). Suits's abstract view of golf seems to align with that of the hypothetical golf pro offering the President tips on his swing.

Lemieux's point is well-taken: all games are established, played and policed in a broader context, and any attempt to define them can produce inclusions and exclusions, hierarchies and other forms of symbolic violence. The magic circle can operate anti-democratically. In his presentation, Lemieux demonstrated this point by quoting from an interview in which *Golf Digest* asked Trump what he would change if he "ran golf":

> I've felt strongly that golf should be an aspirational game. It shouldn't be a game for all strata of society. It should be something that you aspire to. And I think golf got away from that. And by getting away from it, it actually hurt golf. (Diaz, 2015)

For Trump, golf *is* played by rich people, usually white men, and it *should* be played by them. Golf is simultaneously an "aspirational game," intimately connected to social standing, and is something "honest," separated from the "dishonesty" of government (Diaz, 2015). In this confusing logic, the swing itself has nothing to do with the money that brought the man to the course -- but only certain men should be on the course in the first place. But can simply juxtaposing the two men transfer Trump's logic to Suits?

Lemieux's presentation followed on the publication of *Metagaming*, in which Boluk and Lemieux argue for the inextricability of ludic text and societal context: "metagames" rupture "the logic of the game, escaping the formal autonomy of both ideal rules and utopian play via those practical and material factors not immediately enclosed within the game as we know it" (2017, p. 2). Every game has its metagames, and each term affects the other. Given this understanding of metagames, it is no surprise that Boluk and Lemieux find the games of *The Grasshopper* to be frustratingly removed from any broader context: footraces proceed around an actual track without regard for the hypothetically optimal route over the infield; golfers never consider the possibility of simply dropping the ball in the hole.

Perhaps more importantly, there is no such thing as "a world without winters" (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017, 7). Boluk and Lemieux's second criticism concerns Suits's vision of Utopia, a futuristic technological paradise in which the ill-prepared metaphorical Grasshopper will not die due to the cold, and in which actual people will not have to work to enjoy life. Utopia, for Suits, is free of instrumentalism, hardship and unrequited desire; its satiated inhabitants find themselves with nothing to do but play games -- "transcendental objects no longer constrained by time and space" (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017, p. 7).

Boluk and Lemieux find fault with these accounts of actual gameplay and an imaginary Utopia not only because they fail to accurately describe the world. By ignoring the "phenomenal, material, historical, economic, or political practices" that inform game design and play (2017, p. 7), they argue that Suits both mischaracterizes his object of study and contributes to a gamer culture informed by "[t]he dream of an immersive, escapist, autonomous, and fantastic gamespace," one that "structures consumption and production within the videogame industry" and "sells an ideology" (2017, p. 227). By bracketing the real world in pursuit of pure definitions, Suits becomes complicit in the cultural politics that leads to the defense of Dickwolves (Salter and Blodgett, 2012), the call for "ethics in games journalism" (Mortensen, 2016), and the general appeal to "keep politics out of videogames" -- all of which of course are, at the very minimum, ways of defending the indefensible and highly political status quo.

I argued earlier that there is evidence in *The Grasshopper* demonstrating that Suits does in fact consider the relationship between games and society. If this is the case, then Boluk and Lemieux's politically-minded criticism may not hold water. To advance this argument, I turn now to a parable from *The Grasshopper* that extends from games into life.

Ivan and Abdul

The Grasshopper is a daring text in both style and structure: indirect, playful, allusive and non-thetic as often as it is analytical, its arguments and observations are presented in the form of a Socratic dialogue. The principal character is the Grasshopper, the benighted

victim of Aesop's Fable who plays all summer long and then dies in the winter for lack of preparation. Suits retains the plot of the Fable but inverts the moral. At the end of the first chapter, the Grasshopper recounts "a recurring dream, in which it is revealed to me… that everyone alive is in fact engaged in playing elaborate games, while at the same time believing themselves to be going about their ordinary affairs"; and "precisely at the point when each is persuaded [that they are merely playing games]… each ceases to exist" (2014, p. 11-12). The Grasshopper perishes, succumbing to the cold; his human disciplines, Skepticus and Prudence, then puzzle through the meaning of his vision by recalling a prior dialogue in which the Grasshopper defended his definition of gameplay to Skepticus. The majority of the text takes place in this extended recollection, but it ultimately returns to the conversation between Skepticus, Prudence and a Grasshopper who has returned to life in order to recontextualize his vision not as something "ghastly" but as something utopian.

While the utopian frame is significant for contextualizing the rest of the book, I will bracket it for now in order to consider one of the densely layered parables that follows shortly after the definition of gameplay. Skepticus challenges the Grasshopper's definition, proposing that it is too narrow, and then tells the story of Ivan and Abdul, generals who have retired to "the backwater capital of Rien-à-faire" (Suits, 2014, p. 64). Their armies made war on one another in the past, but their retirement sees them turn to the sporting life. In fairly short order, they find themselves frustrated by the "arbitrary restrictions" of sports and games (Suits, 2014, p. 64), and begin to cheat in outrageous fashion. A game of chess, for instance, turns from an attempt to win by checkmate to an attempt to win by fast-drying glue to an all-out conflict that Skepticus characterizes as "a truly mythic contest":

> They fought all that night
> Neath the pale yellow light,
> And the din it was heard from afar.
> Huge multitudes came,
> So great was the fame
> Of Abdul and Ivan Skavar. (Suits, 2014, p. 65)

Here, Skepticus is quoting from a popular music hall song written in the late 1800s, during the Russo-Turkish war, although doing so without attribution. The song, "Abdul Abulbul Ameer," was adapted to various media throughout the 20th century; in 1941, it was given the cartoon treatment by Robert Allen and Hugh Harman, who seemed attentive to the ludic character of the conflict: in their *Abdul the Bulbul Ameer*, an initial provocation leads Ivan to draw a line in the dirt with his sabre; a tussle turns the line into a Tic-Tac-Toe square, and Ivan manages to place three marks in a row, winning the first battle. But he does not win the war: in the song, they both end up dead.

Skepticus, however, tells a different story: "[t]he [chess] game did not end in a tie, but in a stalemate, when both fell to the floor in utter exhaustion, unable to move, and when it was discovered that one of the spectators had made off with the board and the pieces" (Suits, 2014, p. 66). Ivan and Abdul, having turned the game of chess into an ornamental feature of a metagame governed less by rules than their immediate surroundings, find that their play cannot be separated from its context. They begin to search for a different sort of game:

> "[S]ince we will not abide by the rules of the game, the winner can be only he who has gained final mastery of the situation… [W]e can no longer play any game, for games require that we impose artificial restraints upon ourselves in seeking victory, and we refuse to do that."
>
> "Exactly," said Ivan. "When I had my brigade and the general staff used to issue their namby-pamby orders in the name of military honour, I swore that if ever I was chief of staff I would root out all that kind of thing. Rules of war indeed!" (Suits, 2014, p. 66)

The problem standing in the way of "final mastery," in war as in competition, is the rule. Ivan and Abdul want to dispense with the "artificiality" of rules, and therefore decide to play the only sort of game that has none:

> "I am satisfied that the logic is absolutely compelling. There is one, and only one, game left for us to play."
>
> "What game, Ivan? What logic?"
>
> "A fight to the finish, my friend."
>
> "What! Ivan, you must be mad!"
>
> "On the contrary." (Suits, 2014, p. 67)

There is a curious connection here between games, war, violence and rationality that speaks to Suits's implicit politics and his assumptions regarding human agency. One possible interpretation of this connection might be proffered by Huizinga -- that civilization is ultimately built on a set of artificially adopted rules that keep our animal instincts in check, that games offer one particularly visible

form for these rules, and that we should therefore be attentive to the ways in which people play the different games that comprise society. This would be the sort of argument built on liberal humanist assumptions about subjectivity that Tulloch finds frustrating.

I would reject this interpretation, however, by assuming something different about the rationalities of the actors in this particular drama. If Suits does not paint everyone with the same rationalistic brush, but rather attributes different motivations and mindsets to different people in different places and times, then we can take Ivan and Abdul to be the proponents of *a particular kind* of rationality that Suits finds problematic.

There are at least three ways in which Suits expresses this problem. First, as former generals who imagine themselves to be elevated above the weaknesses of civilian life, Ivan and Abdul think that victory is only victory when it is "final" or "complete." Abdul agrees with Ivan when he says that "a past victory is worthless unless it can be extended into future domination" (Suits, 2014, p. 68) [6]. The only acceptable outcome is the complete, irrevocable destruction of the enemy. In highlighting the fact that Ivan and Abdul arrive at this conclusion "logically," while chatting over tea, Suits undermines the racism of the tale: it is not "the sons of the Prophet" or the "truculent" "Muscovites," as the music hall song puts it, who are so prone to violent overreaction -- it is *anyone* who participates in the "rationalism" according to which the enemy must be eradicated. Abdul makes this explicit: "The French are supposed to be the most logical thinkers in the world, but I think only you Russians, Ivan, are crazy enough to act on the basis of a cogent chain of reasoning no matter where it leads" (Suits, 2014, p. 69).

The second way in which Suits criticizes the particular rationality of Ivan and Abdul concerns the arbitrary and decontextualized manner in which they divide friend from enemy. Despite their conflicted history, Ivan and Abdul have nothing against one another; indeed, they are "overjoyed" to "[go] over all of their old campaigns together" (Suits, 2014, p. 64). Motivated not by a nationalistic hatred of the other but by an intellectual interest in strategy, they nonetheless find themselves compelled to categorize the other as an enemy -- someone who threatens their survival, and who must therefore be defeated. The particularity of their relationship dissolves first in the ludic requirement for an opponent and second in the political requirement that the opponent be put down for good [7].

This abstraction relates to a third criticism of the generals' approach: the fact that the violence of Ivan and Abdul's rationalism takes place within "Rien-à-faire" is not coincidental. Retired, Ivan and Abdul lack the purpose that their station had granted them before. Abdul's absence of purpose is so profound, in fact, that he feels that he has no reason to live: he idly contemplates suicide (Suits, 2014, p. 69). The rationality that leads to warfare may well attach itself to fears of the other or concerns for security, but it may also be a simple expression of tedium.

In telling the tale of Ivan and Abdul, then, Suits seems to be offering a subtle critique of the absurdity inherent to apparently logical actions, of the unintended consequences of abstraction, and of the murderous attitude that so often accompanies securitization -- though this is not all. The first section of the story is told by Skepticus, who intends to prove that it is possible to play a game without rules. It ends with Ivan and Abdul agreeing to a fight to the finish, to begin the next morning. The second section is told by the Grasshopper, performing his Socratic rebuttal. Inserting himself as "the Voice of Logic," he demonstrates that Ivan and Abdul have in fact agreed to a rule: they will not begin their battle until the appointed time. Ivan laments their failure: "[a]nd I thought we had finally found a game without the artificiality of rules" (Suits, 2014, p. 71). Ultimately, the Voice of Logic arrests both generals: running to one another before the arbitrarily chosen starting time, they halt in indecision, uncertain whether the other is approaching to call off the fight or to trick them into vulnerability. Reason turns them into statues [8].

Rules, Lines and Utopia

There is an ambivalence to this criticism of rationality driven by the differing allegories offered by Skepticus and the Grasshopper: petrification may be preferable to mutual destruction, but not by much. Rather than resolving this ambivalence, I will note that some of the political force of the parable lies in the figure of the rule. Before Ivan runs off, whether to kill Abdul before dawn or call off the fight we do not know, he laments the fact no game seems to lack the "artificiality of rules" (Suits, 2014, 71). Ivan attempts to flee from this artificiality in order to find some sort of pure experience -- something approaching the intellectualism of their brand of warfare, or perhaps some primal scene predating the fall -- but no such thing exists. If rules are "artificial," this does not imply that there is something "natural" from which they arose or to which players can return.

This emphasis on the inevitable artifice of the rule relates to one of the Grasshopper's prior observations on the nature of another important figure, the line:

> It seems to be the case that the lines drawn in games are not really arbitrary at all. For both that the lines are drawn and also where they are drawn have important consequences not only for the type, but also for the quality, of the game to be played. It might be said that drawing such lines skillfully (and therefore not arbitrarily) is the very essence of the gamewright's craft. (Suits, 2014, p. 32)

Games are built from rules, among other things, and rules work through delineation: inside or out, fair or foul, win or lose. As lines, rules are artificial constructs that curtail, channel, direct and inform player agency. They perform exactly the sort of work that Tulloch suggests. And while they are artificial, this does not mean that they presume some natural state of full agency to which players might return or designers might refer. In his observations on the inescapability of rules and lines, Suits suggests that the artificial and the natural cannot be separated from one another.

Moreover, rules and lines may have effects, implications or resonances beyond the game. If "the very essence of the gamewright's craft" (Suits, 2014, 32) is the drawing of lines, the very essence of political sovereignty is the same. The sovereign draws lines dividing legal from illegal, normal from exceptional, and -- just like Ivan and Abdul, drawing ludic lines in the sand -- friend from enemy (Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt, 2005) [9]. And while the sovereign's lines are the most visible manifestation of this mode of decision making, they are an exemplary form of politics rather than an exceptional one: we can see "the very essence" of the political expressed whenever lines are drawn, which is to say whenever decisions on the rules that bound behaviour are made, in settings that are bureaucratic, algorithmic, economic or even ludic.

Lines and rules, then, are inescapable -- "artificial" but utterly unavoidable. They are techniques for conditioning the conduct of human agents. This means that, in both games and "reality," political actions that do anything other than comply with that conditioning need to reckon with its inescapability. Whether in books, games or politics, we need to discern the lines before we can read between them, and we need to read between them in order to act differently.

This brings me, briefly, to the final word of *The Grasshopper*'s subtitle, which was also Suits's very first word on games (1967a) -- "Utopia," or the relationship between "Games" and "Life." Recall Boluk and Lemieux's criticism: *The Grasshopper* fails insofar as it detaches its definitions and parables from reality, which it does first in its disinterested definition of gameplay and second in its conclusion. In the Grasshopper's Utopia, some miraculous future technology provides for everyone's needs, leaving people free to occupy themselves in whatever way they choose. Once they tire of travelling and talking and lounging on beaches and so on, the Grasshopper imagines, they will inevitably turn to games, voluntarily attempting to overcome unnecessary obstacles. In fact, they will make games of their ancestors' vocations, deciding, for instance, to build houses manually and unnecessarily for the sheer challenge of doing so, or to conduct scientific research entirely for its own sake. This scenario could not be more detached from the "phenomenal, material, historical, economic, or political" phenomena with which Boluk and Lemieux are legitimately concerned (2017, p. 7).

But utopian literature has never been divorced from its cultural context. Utopianism tells us about the here and now. In the case of *The Grasshopper*, the Utopia of gameplay drives home what I take to be among Suits's elemental claims: while the lines dividing work from play, the trivial from the serious, the instrumental from the intrinsic, and text from context are *effective* in the ways in which they guide human and player agency, they are also thin, arbitrary and *changeable*. When we allow them to shift or to blur, bringing the subjects that they separate closer together, we can see the contingent character of what we take to be "universal, necessary, obligatory" (Foucault, 2003, p. 53). By understanding lines like these, to say nothing of the lines that demarcate sovereignties, as artificial, which is to say as artifices that make no claim to origins or returns, we can highlight the processes by which they are constructed. We can, in other words, give the lie to the ostensible ahistoricism of definitions, insisting that they be situated in a continually changing social field.

And we can do this with rather than against Suits. He presents his vision of Utopia as something simultaneously inevitable and impossible -- a future we will one day achieve, but one that will self-destruct as soon as we achieve it. For, he argues, the residents of Utopia will begin to think

> that if their lives were merely games, then those lives were scarcely worth living. Thus motivated, they began to delude themselves into believing that houses made by people were more valuable than houses made by computers…. Then they began to persuade others….

Finally they enacted legislation proscribing their use. Then more time passed, and it seemed to everyone that the carpentry game and the science game were not games at all, but vitally necessary tasks…. Games were once again relegated to the role of mere pastimes useful for bridging the gaps in our serious endeavours. (Suits, 2014, pp. 195-196)

As soon as it is realized, even in the abstract, Suits's Utopia collapses back into the vulgarity of contemporary society. The present and the future are, in this view, both inextricably connected and equally fictitious -- equally artificial. The Grasshopper's Utopia is, then, less a vision of an impossible future for which we should strive than an invitation to consider the values that we attribute to activities like work and play, the ways that those values have been constructed, and the ways that they might be changed. It is, in this interpretation, a commentary on the inextricable and political relationship between games and society.

These words on Suits's Utopia, however, are only my own brief reading of an ambiguous section of a complicated text. I do not intend them to illuminate much beyond the political character of the acts of definition, line drawing or rule making, both because I lack the room to sufficiently engage with Suits's various writings on Utopia (1984; 1988; 2014; 2019) and because I have a tendency to read charming writers too generously and perhaps too politically. Others treat Suits's utopianism differently, and in far greater detail: in addition to Tulloch's and Boluk and Lemieux's interpretations of it as problematically detached, consider, for instance, R. Scott Kretchmar's characterization of it as an example of an "anthropological philosophy" that "ended up addressing our concrete existence" (2006, p. 75), or Allan Bäck's dismissal of it as "postmodern babble" (2008, p. 156), or Francisco Javier López Frías's interpretation of it as both a Kantian regulative ideal (2017) and as a critique of modernity (2019), or Douglas McLaughlin's (2008) claim that the Grasshopper's definitions serve the utopian thesis and not the other way around, or Christopher Yorke's (2019) "rehabilitation" of the utopian thesis for the purposes of game design. Each author brings their own interpretive framework to the parable, and derives their own meaning from it.

Which is a good thing. This is a feature of the text -- not a defect. *The Grasshopper* deserves to be read, and read well, not for the clarity of its definitions nor the rigor of its dialogue but for the ambiguity of its parables. While I think that there are good reasons to read some of these parables, like the story of Ivan and Abdul, in the political framework where I am personally most comfortable, I cannot force that framework onto others. Although I have puzzled over the chapter on Utopia a dozen times, I am still not sure what the Grasshopper means when he says that games "are clues to the future," and that "their serious cultivation now is perhaps our only salvation" (Suits, 2014, p. 194). It is playful and perplexing, and, unlike the definition of gameplay, not at all "portable": it cannot be dropped into a text and then forgotten. This is where its value lies.

Endnotes

[1] The act of definition is also, as Hobbes (1996) knew, a political act of foundation: it is only once key terms have been defined, whether enshrined in law or accepted as conventions or common sense, that a people can become a state.

[2] The political stakes of such acts of definition were highlighted in an exchange between game designers Raph Koster and Robert Yang. Koster (2013), responding to a tweet from Leigh Alexander about objectives and empathy, suggested that certain videogames -- *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine, 2012), *Train* (Brenda Romero, 2009) -- achieve their emotional impact not through "game-like moves" but through "*narrative* moves," asked "whether the work is trying to exclude itself from 'gameyness,'" and noted that he was "interested in definitions." Yang (2013), highlighting the dangers of "apolitical formalism," argued that "these arguments often masquerade as thoughtful discourse but function as a weapon of de-legitimization": they suggest that "these personal games can't really fit a formal definition of game. The emotional leap is that these people can't really fit a formal definition of people. Adding, 'it's okay if it's not a game' comes off as sounding like, 'it's okay if you're not a person,' which doesn't really help you seem apolitical."

[3] An engagement with a text need not be direct in order to be substantive. Suits himself sometimes addresses his predecessors and interlocutors by name in *The Grasshopper*, notably offering a single direct rejoinder to Wittgenstein on the question of whether games can be defined, but he often keeps things allusive, as when he apparently deploys Searle's (1964) notion of constitutive rules without attribution. And while McKenzie Wark, to take a second example, mobilizes Suits's distinction between players, triflers, cheats and spoilsports to comment on the relationship between games and society (or "gamespace"), she references *The Grasshopper* directly

only in a footnote: "[t]his is not just a classic work but a work of art in its own right" (2007, p. 180).

[4] While the definition of gameplay appears in its definitive form in *The Grasshopper*, Suits's writing on games dates back a decade, and is concerned with the connection between games and life from the beginning (1967a; 1967b).

[5] See, for instance, the articles on Suits collected in *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 13(3-4), 2019 and *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 35(2), 2008.

[6] Suits doubles down on his critique of this rationalistic mindset in a public talk delivered five years after the publication of *The Grasshopper*: an obsessive football team that employs "labor-saving devices" realizes "that they can solve all of their problems at one fell swoop. They adopt the tactic of slaughtering any opposing team that appears on the field, and so are finally free to make touchdowns or field goals at will, whenever they want to. But of course that is not to play football at all. Their Utopia has finally arrived and has instantly self-destructed" (1984, p. 22). Suits seemed to be particularly interested in Utopia and rationality in the 1980s, as evidenced by a book review in which he notes that "[d]ystopias do not arise from irrationality but rather from rational immorality" (1988, p. 266).

[7] In condemning this logical, abstract, categorizing mindset, Suits reframes Ivan's disregard for games played according to the rules and warfare conducted according to accepted conventions. Ivan's attitude contrasts directly with that of another famous fictional Russian: for Tolstoy's Prince Andrew, any discussion of "rules of war and magnanimity to foes" serves only to render the worst violence palatable and thereby to enable it to continue (Tolstoy, 1997, p. 857); for Ivan, on the other hand, war, games and human lives are to be treated with something like mere curiosity or idle engagement. Incidentally, Prince Andrew notes the facile comparison of war to chess in the same section of *War and Peace*, decrying the comparison both for its inaccuracy and for its inhumanity: "[a]s it is we have played at war -- that's what's vile!" (Tolstoy, 1997, p. 857).

[8] Reason also turns donkeys into corpses. The situation of Ivan and Abdul resembles that of Buridan's ass: hungry, thirsty, and positioned exactly between a pile of hay and a trough of water, it perishes thanks to rationalistic indecision. Given the philosophical pedigree of Buridan's paradox, it would be surprising if Suits had not intended the allusion.

[9] International relations theorist RBJ Walker describes sovereignty in terms of delineation: "[m]odern forms of sovereignty express and reproduce very specific ways of drawing the line, both literally and metaphorically" (2010, p. 101).

Acknowledgements

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