

# A critique of Bernard Suits' 1967 definition of "a game"

Bernard Suits (in his book 'The Grasshopper' from 1967) defined a game as such (clarifications in brackets are mine):

"To play a game is to engage in **activity** directed toward bringing about a specific **state of affairs** (prelusory goal), using only **[limited] means** permitted by specific **rules** (lusory means), where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity (**lusory attitude**). [...] Playing a game is the **voluntary** attempt to **overcome unnecessary obstacles**."

or, perhaps more clearly:

"To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the **rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means** [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]."

The following are some challenges to his definition:

1. *"the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules"* One criticism of Suits' definition here is that it doesn't account for the more modern phenomena of video games, where the player's means are NOT more limited in scope than they would be in absence of the rules. E.g. In real life it would be possible to pick up a football and place it in the goal without actually playing soccer to do that. But in FIFA (video game about soccer) it is not possible to place the football in the goal without actually playing the game. The mean of "merely picking up the football and walking with it into the goal" is not even possible in FIFA, so the means permitted by the game is not more limited in scope. The means here are the one and only scope. See also this, for the same critique, discussed more broadly: <https://medium.com/interlingual-critical-writing/impossible-impermissible-and-queer-41e45657ff21>
2. [Karhulahti \(2013\)](#) says this about Suits' definition "puzzles can rarely be considered prohibiting the *"use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means"* (Suits 1978, 54), which seems to be one of the core characteristics of games (cf. Suits 1985)." Even though he uses it to argue that this means a puzzle is not a game, he also says that a puzzle is widely recognized in game studies to be a game (see the introduction to his article).
3. Would you call a single Scratchcard a game? It is a *"voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"*...

4. Is [Minecraft](#) a "game"? (Talking about the original, plain vanilla version of Minecraft). It is not "*directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs (prelusory goal)*"...
5. Is a multiple-choice quiz (MCQ) taken for fun a "game"? Suits' definition is not narrow enough (i.e. not *sufficient*):
  - a. Is a multiple-choice quiz (MCQ) a game? It is according to Suits' definition: Specific state of affairs = 100% score on the quiz. Limited/lusory means = only use your existing knowledge, and not being allowed to search the internet for answers to the quiz. So, taking a multiple-choice quiz for fun could indeed be "a voluntary attempt at overcoming unnecessary obstacles".
  - b. [Jonathan Ellis \(On the Concept of a Game, 2011\)](#) have also rejected Suits' definition of a game based on the fact that it can classify non-game activities as games. Ellis makes the example that a student solving a physics problem set, over the summer vacation, out of sheer pleasure, is not a game. Even though the student would have a prelusory goal (solve the problems), lusory means and constitutive rules (restricts herself from looking at the answers to the problem set before she has fulfilled them), and lusory attitude (she accepts her self-imposed restriction because it makes her exercise possible; to enable the fun of it).
6. Suits' definition is also not broad enough (does not include all *necessary* conditions) - The Eiffel Tower Game:
  - a. "In order to see why Suits' three conditions are not jointly necessary, consider the following. Two friends are sitting in a Parisian cafe lamenting their boredom. One friend says to the other, "I have an idea. Let's play a game. Let's see who can get to the top of the Eiffel Tower faster. You may go however you like; there are no rules. You may even murder people who are in your way, if you like; that is, murder is not forbidden by the game. What do you say?" "Sure, let's do it," the other one says. "Great," the first says, "OK, on your mark . . . ready . . . set . . . go!" And then they both go running out of the cafe. It would be difficult to deny that these friends are now playing a game. But there appear to be no rules prohibiting more efficient in favour of less efficient means. There are no rules concerning the means by which the friends go to the Eiffel Tower." - [Jonathan Ellis \(On the Concept of a Game, 2011\)](#). Ellis also mentions a possible defense which would say "it is a rule to wait until the game begins", and counters it by basically saying "not if it has evolved an understanding that the game begins immediately when it is first proposed/uttered". He also mentions another possible defense which would say "it is a rule to explain the game before starting it, so you cannot start running before having

explained it to your opponent", and counters it by introducing a third friend who explains the game to the two players, so that no one of them has the ability to start before the game is revealed/explained.

7. Suits' *efficiency*-criteria is not really an essential criteria. Games are not essentially about *efficiency* (just as others have argued that games are not about *production*). Perhaps *efficiency* are merely partly correlating with some other perhaps essential feature ("games make *obstacles*", perhaps). So thus the use of the term efficiency may confuse the issue more than clarify it:

- a. "the use of efficiency is not as clear or helpful at picking out the essence of games as something like obstacle-making (or maybe some other even clearer alternative). I think Suits is using efficiency as a way of talking about obstacle-making and in that way he is not necessarily discussing something different. But defining it in terms of efficiency raises some concerns. (1) It suggest something more quantitative — since so often efficiency is talked about in terms of percentages and the like. I worry that quantitative sense of the term makes the efficiency aspect here seem like something it is not. (2) It doesn't provide a clear enough distinction between in-game activities where the point is efficiency within the rules/play of the game. The offense in American football is trying to get to the endzone as efficiently as possible within the bounds of the game. We praise a goalkeeper's efficiency at saves in soccer or hockey. So defining games in terms of efficiency reduction can cause some confusion. The point being that if by efficiency-reduction Suits just means (as I think he does) obstacle-making, then the latter is a clearer way to put it since it avoids these potential confusions." - Shawn E. Klein (who wrote "Defining Sport"), discussing 'The Grasshopper' by Bernard Suits, on his own blog:  
<https://sportsethicist.com/2014/05/08/the-grasshopper-by-bernard-suits/>

8. Is writing poetry a "game"? It can certainly be recreational fun, with rules (rhyming, alliteration, the frame of the poem) and goal (complete the poem). Kind of a puzzle. According to Suits' definition, it is a "game"...
9. Is playing a movie a "game"? If we inject it into Suits' definition, it surely seems so...!
  - a. "To play a [movie] is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [the ending of the movie], using only means permitted by rules [watching it from beginning to end], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [cannot jump directly to the end of the movie], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [having to watch the movie from the beginning is accepted because it make possible the movie-watching activity]."

- b. Playing a [movie] is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles [sitting through the length of the movie just to see how the story ends].
10. 10. Is [Mao](#) a "game"? Suits uses the concept "pre-lusory" which means directly "before-playing". A prelusory goal implies that the goal is established for the players in advance of playing the game. But in Mao the goal is not established before the game, but discovered during the game.
11. 11. Is exercising a "game"? Exercising (i.e. lifting weights, or jumping rope) is a *"voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"*. The weights or the rope isn't strictly necessary in getting where you want, you could exercise with different means. No one forces you to exercise, either.

It would be interesting to discuss either of these challenges to Suits' definition, and see whether any of them may be rebutted.

[3 Comments](#)

Share

Save

Hide

Report

100% Upvoted

**This thread is archived**

New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast

SORT BY

BEST



level 1

[vonklaude](#)

[1 year ago](#) · edited 1 year ago

I don't believe a rebuttal is possible, beyond perhaps suggesting that Suits' intent was elsewhere, and so far as it goes, useful to understand. It seems to me that he focuses on the behaviour of the players - what they aim to do and the constraints they accept - rather than what elements might

together equate to a game. "To play a game..." could be taken literally as his concern, rather than "What is a game?"

To say that Suit's definition is unsatisfactory could make one feel that there ought to be some definition that by contrast is satisfactory (or at least, more so)? For example, what do you think of Jarvinen's, or Juul's definitions?

2

Share

ReportSave



level 2

[redbar0n-](#)

[1 year ago](#) · edited 1 year ago

It seems to me that he focuses on the behaviour of the players - what they aim to do and the constraints

Yes, I agree: Suit's definition strongly presuppose *intentionality* and describe the *phenomenon* of (playing) games, more so than "games" themselves, insofar as "games" may be some kind of (abstract) "object" that may be described.

Juul's definition is certainly up for critique. Most trivially because of the subjectivity it entails ("player feels attached to outcome" - Really, does Chess cease to be a game if either player's emotional state changes? If the player is less competitive, or stops caring that much about the