



# The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia

*Bernard Suits , Thomas Hurka (Introduction)*

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## **The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia** Bernard Suits , Thomas Hurka (Introduction)

In the mid twentieth century the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously asserted that games are indefinable; there are no common threads that link them all. "Nonsense," says the sensible Bernard Suits: "playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." The short book Suits wrote demonstrating precisely that is as playful as it is insightful, as stimulating as it is delightful. Suits not only argues that games can be meaningfully defined; he also suggests that playing games is a central part of the ideal of human existence, so games belong at the heart of any vision of Utopia. Originally published in 1978, The Grasshopper is now re-issued with a new introduction by Thomas Hurka and with additional material (much of it previously unpublished) by the author, in which he expands on the ideas put forward in The Grasshopper and answers some questions that have been raised by critics.

## **The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia Details**

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## From Reader Review *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* for online ebook

### Anthony Buckley says

Wittgenstein's idea that there is no single feature shared by all (or even most) of the objects we call "games" is very disturbing. Worse, he said we could understand any specific meaning of the word "game" only within a particular "game". This intentionally confusing idea is here challenged by Bernard Suits in a deceptively intelligent, witty, even revolutionary book.

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### Michael says

Meh. I guess this compares well to other works of philosophy because the parody of Socrates is mildly entertaining, but most of it is semantics and definitions. Worse, I doubt those definitions are correct or of practical use. Far better are books like Stuart Brown's *Play* or Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival*. The thoughts on utopia redeem this slightly: what would humans do when work is no longer necessary for survival? Games must be part of the meaning of life.

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### Timothy says

This is a notable contribution to the literature on games, and should be read if that is something that you are into. I wouldn't highly recommend it as a reading experience: perhaps some people enjoy the refashioning of thought experiments as full-fledged fictional narratives, but I'm not one of them. The "clever" form does make what would otherwise be a dry exploration more readable, but it caused me a significant degree of irritation as well. Suits provides a definition of games, which will prove useful for anyone doing research in this area.

As a side note, I am curious about who made the decision to bring in an illustrator for a work of academic philosophy. While the chapter illustrations add nothing tangible, they are appealing in their own right.

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### James Klagge says

An odd but engaging book that takes on Wittgenstein's challenge to define "game." After considering only a few possibilities, Wittgenstein decides that game has no essential definition--that is, that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions true of all games (as "closed plane figure with 3 straight sides" gives necessary and sufficient conditions for being a triangle). Suits offers this definition of playing a game: "engaging in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity" (pp. 48-9). And then he offers a more memorable version (p. 55): "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." He then subjects this to multiple tests to show it covers all plausible cases, while excluding the right cases as well. Gets a bit tiresome at points, but is persuasive. The first appendix, where he reflects on the process of

definition is especially interesting. The section towards the end where he reflects on the role of games in utopia was weird and not very interesting or convincing to me. As far as the challenge to Wittgenstein, I would say that Wittgenstein's real point was not that game could not be defined, but that it need not be defined (in essentialist terms) to be a perfectly useful concept. Wittgenstein proposed that it was a "family resemblance" concept, that had all the unity it needed from the various overlapping similarities that held the examples together. Suits considers this a cop-out--an excuse for not really seeking a definition. The deeper philosophical question is whether all concepts can be given essentialist definitions. Socrates seemed to suppose so, and Suits seems to follow suit. But it is hard to know how this could be shown. In fact, it is hard to see how this could be true, since it would seem to lead to circularity (as with dictionaries) or an infinite regress. If one admits there must be some terms that go undefined (in essentialist terms), then the relevant question here is whether Game would be one of the terms that goes undefined.

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### **c. says**

very bizarre very interesting read. honestly the most important chapters are 2, 3, 14, and 15. a socratic exploration of game play and the function of sport in utopia.

it begins with a riddle in the form of a dream that the grasshopper has: there is a world in which everyone thinks they are doing work, but are actually playing a game. the moment that grasshopper explains what is going on, the person disappears.

the solution to the riddle is that the people in grasshopper's dream are living in a utopia, where work is no longer necessary but can be done. and, by extension, once they learn that they are only playing games, then they feel their lives are no longer worth living, because games are meaningless, so they disappear.

SO. it's very strange. but also very enlightening re: thesis work. so thats good. a really quick read.

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### **Shawn says**

"The Grasshopper" is unique philosophy monograph. It is part narrative, part dialogue, part treatise. It is also humorous and easy to read. It, quite self-consciously, plays off elements from Socratic dialogues, the New Testament, and Aesop's fables. Though I don't agree with many of its philosophic conclusions, the work, overall, is successful at pulling all these elements off. That is, I enjoyed reading it and found it enlightening.

The main focus of the book is an extended discussion of the definition of the concept of "Game." While in some ways, it is meant as an answer to Wittgenstein's famous claim that one can't define "game," it is more philosophically rich than that. Suits' discussion is really more an analysis of the meaning of life. The Grasshopper's main philosophical claim seems to be that in Utopia, all meaning in life would come from some kind of game-playing. By Utopia, he means a state of life where all activity is purely and totally voluntary and no instrumental activity is necessary. Suits argues that the only activities in such a utopia would games (or other forms of play).

I think Suits is wrong here, for several reasons. Without going into detail (I hope to write a long blog fleshing this out), his use of Utopia is irrelevant. The life he imagines here is impossible, and even if it were, such beings living that life would be nothing at all like human beings. So, whatever we might learn about

such a utopian life is meaningless for the life human beings live. His accounting of play as “all of those activities which are intrinsically valuable to those who engage in them” is far too broad (This sweeps in things like one’s career) (146). His distinction between instrumentally and intrinsically valuable activities is too constrained and too sharp (it leaves no room for mixed activities or constitutively valuable activities). So while I agree that game-playing and more generally play itself are important, even central, aspects of human life, I disagree that is the only intrinsically valuable (whatever that means) human activity.

My main quibble (and it might be more than a quibble) with Suits’ definition of games is the idea that “the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means” (54). It is a quibble if by less efficient he really means obstacle-making. I do think all games involve rules that place certain kinds of obstacles for the players to overcome, surmount, or play around. These obstacles often mean that only less efficient means for achieving the goals/ends of the games are available. So my concern is that the focus on efficiencies is non-essential. The essence is obstacle-making, not efficiency reduction--even if these end up being co-extensive. I am not sure they are co-extensive; hence, my concern that this is more than a mere quibble.

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### **justin says**

The original publication is an especially beautiful book, with a striking illustration by Frank Newfeld at the outset of each chapter. I haven't come across the new printing, but it would be a real shame if the illustrations were missing.

The book is a dialogue on the meaning of games and the potential for play to stand as the basis for a valid and principled ethos. The discussion is between a kind of guru of leisure, based cleverly on the character of the profligate grasshopper from Aesop's fable, and his disciples, Skepticus and Prudence. Knowing that he is not long for this world, the teacher makes sure to leave his students with a few puzzles to resolve for themselves. I've read it several times over the past few years, and always found it engaging.

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### **M K says**

This book is simultaneously strange and very engaging. An interesting insight into game theory and the definition of a game. The premiss is quite unique.

Suits definition of a game is helpful in game studies. His focus in this book was to define a game and then use a series of 'but what about' or 'what if' scenarios to strengthen his initial definition. The unexpected and most curious part of this book is the entire text is a conversation between two ants and a dying grasshopper. Once you recover from this basic scenario, I think you will find the logic sound and the reasoning behind the game theory very solid. It is well written, well edited and the arguments are convincing.

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### **Julius says**

In one of the appendices, Suits quotes a line from a review of his book in *The Ottawa Citizen* that he claims

'set my teeth on edge': "a pleasing, unusual book with an odd texture--something like a sandwich of gravel and jam." Oddly enough, I think this criticism more or less hits the mark. The jam is the overly jokey/corny structure, the gravel is the indigestible and didactic logic embedded throughout. Maybe less like a gravel and jam sandwich and more like a box of Monty Python chocolates:

P: What's this one: 'spring surprise'?

M: Ah - now, that's our speciality - covered with darkest creamy chocolate. When you pop it into your mouth, steel bolts spring out and plunge straight through both cheeks.

P: Well where's the pleasure in that? If people place a nice chocky in their mouth, they don't want their cheeks pierced.

In the introduction, The Grasshopper is compared to Plato's dialogues, and yes, the book is largely structured as a series of dialogues. But whereas reading Plato's dialogues spawned a lifelong interest in philosophy, I fear that early exposure to The Grasshopper might well have extinguished it.

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## **Heather says**

This was a remarkably and unexpectedly insightful book on game theory. I was researching for my thesis, and came across a reference quoting Suits' definition of games. I thought the definition was remarkably profound, and wanted to use it for my paper. Since I prefer to read the original source myself, I picked up the book and was pleasantly surprised to find a philosophical treatise on the nature of games as told through the mouth of Aesop's grasshopper.

My thesis is on sports, and in this book sport and games fall under the same definition:

Long version: "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 an activity [lusory attitude]."

Short version: "...playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (41).

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## **Jeremy Hornik says**

A playful and intellectually precise attempt to define games. The book is written as a series of dialogues between the Grasshopper (the foe of the Ant from the old fable) and his students, Skepticus and Prudence. It's quite funny. The dialogue has a great deal of wit, and the examples he draws to support his points are frequently hilarious. (For example, he imagines Sir Edmund Hilary, having climbed Everest, meeting a man in a bowler with a copy of the Times who has just taken the escalator up the other side.)

The definition of games is quite good, I think, although it may or may not help the maker of games. Here's the definition:

"To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules,

where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity."

Or, in the example of the 400-meter dash, to play is to try to run across the finish line (not to drive across it), going all the way around the track (instead of running straight across it.) If this doesn't sound like your cup of tea, it probably isn't. But if you like to think about games and rules, this will entertain and delight.

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### **John says**

Really enjoyable exploration of a definition of games, written in fine philosophical style, with poise and wit and colorfully imagined anecdotes. Sir Edmund Hillary arrives at the top of Everest, triumphant and more dead than alive, to find a man who, with a copy of the morning paper under his elbow, has taken the elevator up the other side; avid chess players receive boxes and boxes of captured chess pieces in the mail; two retired generals hold a companionable gaming feud, with net-piercing tennis balls and, in chess, the secret administration of hallucinogenic drugs as an offensive weapon. Allusions to Socrates, Jesus, Shakespeare... a playful book with weight. Very well-illustrated, too.

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### **Asl? Can says**

Asl?nda kitap izlemesi zevkli bir tart??ma ?eklinde ilerliyor ama ilgim ba?ka yöne kayd??? için son iki bölümü okumak üzere elime alman hayli uzun sürdü.

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### **Joy says**

I am going to have to get my own copy of this, I feel like I need to read it three or four more times to really get my mind around all of what is going on here. It reminds me of \_Godel, Escher, Bach\_, and like that book is both quite straightforward and deeply profound. I like books that make my mind feel stretched and exercised.

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### **Burak says**

Great, great little book this is.

First, I love the Socratic dialogue as a tool for opening and widening ideas. It is not only great as a method of presentation, I find, but as a method of doing "philosophy" in general, and not only for Socrates and Plato, but even for humble beings like myself. I find that this is a really great tool for me to test one's own convictions. In the absence of people to converse and challenge me, I often find myself in an internal, imagined dialogue: Without answering to potential objections from others -imagined, written on in actual conversation- the mind cannot "stretch" and withdraws to a rigid, defensive state. The dialogue -and the implied way of doing "communicative/collective philosophy"- may be the only tool available that takes ideas to their logical conclusion and fulfillment (always temporary that fulfillment may be). In this age of monologues, hard convictions, and in which everyone has urgent needs to talk but feels no need to listen -

hence no one is really listening- I feel that the Socratic dialogue is a gem to be rediscovered.

So, kudos to two of the wisest philosophers ever lived, Socrates and Plato... and then to Suits for bringing them back to our times.

Then, the content: Most of the book rests on building a "definition" of the game. That may sound very dry and boring, but embedded in dialogue and fairy-tale-like playfulness, it becomes what it truly is: a fun, playful inquiry into the nature of what we call a "game," in other words, an attempt to understand what a "game" really is. The book, I believe, greatly succeeds in this regard. People who are interested in the philosophy of games, such as fans of Huizinga and related thinkers, will find great food for thought in here.

The last section on "Utopia" could have been articulated much better, but the message gets across: We need an ethic of "work" that rests not on painful sacrifice, but on our internal convictions, emotions and drives, from our "ideals of existence". I believe that this is possible, and I believe it is possible even without the very ideal conditions presented by Suits at this last section. It is possible to turn life itself into a giant and continuous game, it is possible to "live like play" without giving up neither realism nor security -this is to say, while fulfilling basic human material needs at the same time-. To those who are quick to deem this horizon "impossible," I would respond that "the impossible" is a widely circulated ideology on its own. I have much to say on this, but this is not the place.

In short, great book with very few shortcomings.

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