

Construction of a Definition

Bernard Suits

Context

*I was led to attempt a definition of games because of some earlier work I had done on the concept of play, namely my M.A. thesis at the University of Chicago titled "Play and Value in Aristotle, Schiller, and Kierkegaard." In 1967 "What is a Game?" was published in **Philosophy of Science**, and later it became the core idea of my 1978 book, **The Grasshopper**, which is largely a series of objections to, and defenses of, a definition of games in the form of dialogues between the eponymous Grasshopper and his disciple Skepticus. A second edition of **The Grasshopper** with a special Introduction by Thomas Hurka will be published by Broadview Press.*

The Rules of a Game

What Is a Game?

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Game Playing as the Selection of Inefficient Means

Mindful of the ancient canon that the quest for knowledge obliges us to proceed from what is more obvious to what is less obvious [began the Grasshopper], let us start with the commonplace belief that playing games is different from working. Games therefore might be expected to be what work, in some salient respect, is not. Let us now baldly characterize work as "technical activity," by which I mean activity in which an agent seeks to employ the most efficient available means for reaching a desired goal. Since games, too, evidently have goals, and since means are evidently employed for their attainment, the possibility suggests itself that games differ from technical activities in that the means employed in games are not the most efficient. Let us say, then, that games are goal-directed activities in which inefficient means are intentionally chosen. For example, in racing games one voluntarily goes all round the track in an effort to arrive at the finish line instead of "sensibly" cutting straight across the infield.

The following considerations, however, seem to cast doubt on this proposal. The goal of a game, we may say, is winning the game. Let us take an example. In poker I am a winner if I have more money when I stop playing than I had when I started. But suppose that one of the other players, in the course of the game, repays me a debt of a hundred dollars, or suppose I hit another player on the head and take all of his money from him. Then, although I have not won a single hand all evening, am I nevertheless a winner? Clearly not, since I did not increase my money as a consequence of playing poker. In order to be a winner (a sign and product of which is, to be sure, the gaining of money) certain conditions must be met which are not met by the collection of a debt or by felonious assault. These conditions are the rules of poker, which tell us what we can and what we cannot do with the cards and the money. Winning at poker consists in increasing one's money by using only means permitted by the rules, although mere obedience to the rules does not by itself ensure victory. Better and worse means are equally permitted by the rules. Thus in Draw Poker retaining an ace along with a pair and discarding the ace while retaining the pair are both permissible plays, although one is usually a better play than the other. The means for winning at poker, therefore, are limited, but not completely determined, by the rules. Attempting to win at poker may accordingly be described as attempting to gain money by using the most efficient means available, where only those means permitted by the rules are available. But if that is so, then playing poker is a technical activity as originally defined.

Still, this seems a strange conclusion. The belief that working and playing games are quite different things is very widespread, yet we seem obliged to say that playing a game is just another job to be done as competently as possible. Before giving up the thesis that playing a game involves a sacrifice of efficiency, therefore, let us consider one more example. Suppose I make it my purpose to get a small round object into a hole in the ground as efficiently as possible. Placing it in the hole with my hand would be a natural means to adopt. But surely I would not take a stick with a piece of metal on one end of it, walk three or four hundred yards away from the hole, and then attempt to propel the ball into the hole with the stick. That would not be technically intelligent. But such an undertaking is an extremely popular game, and the foregoing way of describing it evidently shows how games differ from technical activities.

But of course it shows nothing of the kind. The end in golf is not correctly described as getting a ball into a hole in the ground, or even, to be more precise, into several holes in a set order. It is to achieve that end with the smallest possible number of strokes. But a stroke is a certain type of swing with a golf club. Thus, if my end were simply to get a ball into a number of holes in the ground, I would not be likely to use a golf club in order to achieve it, nor would I stand at a considerable distance from each hole. But if my end were to get a ball into some holes with a golf club while standing at a considerable distance from each hole, why then I would certainly use a golf club and I would certainly take up such positions. Once committed to that end, moreover, I would strive to accomplish it as efficiently as possible. Surely no one would want to maintain that if I conducted myself with utter efficiency in pursuit of this end I would not be playing a game, but that I *would* be playing a game just to the extent that I permitted my efforts to become sloppy. Nor is it the case that my use of a golf club is a less efficient way to achieve my end than would be the use of my hand. To refrain from using a golf club as a means for sinking a ball with a golf club is not more efficient because it is not possible. Inefficient selection of means, accordingly, does not seem to be a satisfactory account of game playing.

The Inseparability of Rules and Ends in Games

The objection advanced against the last thesis rests upon, and thus brings to light, consideration of the place of rules in games: they seem to stand in a peculiar relation to ends. The end in poker is not simply to gain money, or in golf simply to get a ball into a hole, but to do these things in prescribed (or, perhaps more accurately, not to do them in proscribed) ways; that is, to do them only in accordance with rules. Rules in games thus seem to be in some sense inseparable

from ends, for to break a game rule is to render impossible the attainment of an end. Thus, although you may receive the trophy by lying about your golf score, you have certainly not won the game. But in what we have called technical activity it *is* possible to gain an end by breaking a rule; for example, gaining a trophy by lying about your golf score. So while it is possible in a technical action to break a rule without destroying the original end of the action, in games the reverse appears to be the case. If the rules are broken the original end becomes impossible of attainment, since one cannot (really) win the game unless one plays it, and one cannot (really) play the game unless one obeys the rules of the game.

This may be illustrated by the following case. Professor Snooze has fallen asleep in the shade provided by some shrubbery in a secluded part of the campus. From a nearby walk I observe this. I also notice that the shrub under which he is reclining is a man-eating plant, and I judge from its behaviour that it is about to eat the man Snooze. As I run across to him I see a sign which reads KEEP OFF THE GRASS. Without a qualm I ignore this prohibition and save Snooze's life. Why did I make this (no doubt scarcely conscious) decision? Because the value of saving Snooze's life (or of saving a life) outweighed the value of obeying the prohibition against walking on the grass.

Now the choices in a game appear to be radically unlike this choice. In a game I cannot disjoin the end, winning, from the rules in terms of which winning possesses its meaning. I can, of course, decide to cheat in order to gain the pot, but then I have changed my end from winning a game to gaining money. Thus, in deciding to save Snooze's life my purpose was not "to save Snooze while at the same time obeying the campus rules for pedestrians." My purpose was to save Snooze's life, and there were alternative ways in which this might have been accomplished. I could, for example, have remained on the sidewalk and shouted to Snooze in an effort to awaken him. But precious minutes might have been lost, and in any case Snooze, although he tries to hide it, is nearly stone deaf. There are evidently two distinct ends at issue in the Snooze episode: saving Snooze and obeying the rule, out of respect either for the law or for the lawn. And I can achieve either of these ends without at the same time achieving the other. But in a game the end and the rules do not admit of such disjunction. It is impossible for me to win the game and at the same time to break one of its rules. I do not have open to me the alternatives of winning the game honestly and winning the game by cheating, since in the latter case I would not be playing the game at all and thus could not, *a fortiori*, win it.

Now if the Snooze episode is treated as an action which has one, and only one, end—(Saving Snooze) *and* (Keeping off the grass)—it can be argued that the action has become, just by virtue of that fact, a game. Since there would be no independent alternatives, there would be no choice to be made; to achieve one part of the end without achieving the other part would be to fail utterly. On such an interpretation of the episode suppose I am congratulated by a grateful faculty for my timely intervention. A perfectly appropriate response would be: “I don’t deserve your praise. True, I saved Snooze, but since I walked on the grass it doesn’t count,” just as though I were to admit to carrying the ball to the cup on the fifth green. Or again, on this interpretation, I would originally have conceived the problem in a quite different way: “Let me see if I can save Snooze without walking on the grass.” One can then imagine my running as fast as I can (but taking no illegal short cuts) to the Athletic Building, where I request (and meticulously sign out) a pole vaulter’s pole with which I hope legally to prod Snooze into wakefulness, whereupon I hurry back to Snooze to find him disappearing into the plant. “Well,” I remark, not without complacency, “I didn’t win, but at least I played the game.”

It must be pointed out, however, that this example could be misleading. Saving a life and keeping off the grass are, as values, hardly on the same footing. It is possible that the Snooze episode appears to support the contention at issue (that games differ from technical actions because of the inseparability of rules and ends in the former) only because of the relative triviality of one of the alternatives. This peculiarity of the example can be corrected by supposing that when I decide to obey the rule to keep off the grass, my reason for doing so is that I am a kind of demented Kantian and thus regard myself to be bound by the most weighty philosophical considerations to honour *all* laws with equal respect. So regarded, my maddeningly proper efforts to save a life would not appear ludicrous but would constitute moral drama of the highest order. But since we are not demented Kantians, Skepticus, a less fanciful though logically identical example may be cited.

Let us suppose the life of Snooze to be threatened not by a man-eating plant but by Dr. Threat, who is found approaching the snoozing Snooze with the obvious intention of murdering him. Again I want to save Snooze’s life, but I cannot do so (let us say) without killing Threat. However, there is a rule to which I am very strongly committed which forbids me to take another human life. Thus, although (as it happens) I could easily kill Threat from where I stand (with a loaded and cocked pistol I happen to have in my hand), I decided to try to save Snooze by other means, just because of my wish to obey the rule which forbids killing. I therefore run

towards Threat with the intention of wresting the weapon from his hand. I am too late, and he murders Snooze. This seems to be a clear case of an action having a conjunctive end of the kind under consideration, but one which we are not at all inclined to call a game. My end, that is to say, was not simply to save the life of Snooze, just as in golf it is not simply to get the ball into the hole, but to save his life without breaking a certain rule. I want to put the ball into the hole fairly and I want to save Snooze morally. Moral rules are perhaps generally regarded as figuring in human conduct in just this fashion. Morality says that if something can be done only immorally it ought not to be done at all. 'What profiteth it a man,' etc. The inseparability of rules and ends does not, therefore, seem to be a completely distinctive characteristic of games.

Game Rules as Not Ultimately Binding

It should be noticed, however, that the foregoing criticism requires only a partial rejection of the proposal at issue. Even though the attack seems to show that not all things which correspond to the formula are games, it may still be the case that all games correspond to the formula. This suggests that we ought not to reject the proposal but ought first to try to limit its scope by adding to it an adequate differentiating principle. Such a principle is suggested by the striking difference between the two Snooze episodes that we have noted. The efforts to save Snooze from the man-eating plant without walking on the grass appeared to be a game because saving the grass strikes us as a trifling consideration when compared with saving a life. But in the second episode, where KEEP OFF THE GRASS is replaced by THOU SHALT NOT KILL, the situation is quite different. The difference may be put in the following way. The rule to keep off the grass is not an ultimate command, but the rule to refrain from killing perhaps is. This suggests that, in addition to being the kind of activity in which rules are inseparable from ends, games are also the kind of activity in which commitment to these rules is never ultimate. For the person playing the game there is always the possibility of there being a non-game rule to which the game rule may be subordinated. The second Snooze episode is not a game, therefore, because the rule to which the rescuer adheres, even to the extent of sacrificing Snooze for its sake, is, for him, an ultimate rule. Rules are always lines that we draw, but in games the lines are always drawn short of a final end or a paramount command. Let us say, then, that a game is an activity in which observance of rules is part of the end of the activity, and where such rules are non-ultimate; that is, where other rules can always supersede the game rules; that is, where the player can always stop playing the game.

However, consider the Case of the Dedicated Driver. Mario Stewart (the driver in question) is a favoured entrant in the motor car race of the century at Malaise. And in the Malaise race there is a rule which forbids a vehicle to leave the track on pain of disqualification. At a crucial point in the race a child crawls out upon the track directly in the path of Mario's car. The only way to avoid running over the child is to leave the track and suffer disqualification. Mario runs over the child and completes the race. I submit that we ought not, for this reason, to deny that he is playing a game. It no doubt strikes us as inappropriate to say that a person who would do such a thing is (merely) playing. But the point is that Mario is not playing in an unqualified sense, he is playing a *game*. And he is evidently playing it more whole-heartedly than the ordinary driver is prepared to play it. From his point of view a racer who turned aside instead of running over the child would have been playing *at* racing; that is, he would not have been a dedicated player. But it would be paradoxical indeed if supreme dedication to an activity somehow vitiated the activity. We do not say that a man is not really digging a ditch just because his whole heart is in it.

However, the rejoinder may be made that, to the contrary, that is just the mark of a game: it, unlike digging ditches, is just the kind of thing which cannot command ultimate loyalty. That, it may be contended, is precisely the force of the proposal about games under consideration. And in support of this contention it might be pointed out that it is generally acknowledged that games are in some sense non-serious undertakings. We must therefore ask in what sense games are, and in what sense they are not, serious. What is believed when it is believed that games are not serious? Not, certainly, that the players of games always take a very light-hearted view of what they are doing. A bridge player who played his cards randomly might justly be accused of failing to take the game seriously—indeed, of *failing* to play the game at all just because of his failure to take it seriously. It is much more likely that the belief that games are not serious means what the proposal under consideration implies: that there is always something in the life of a player of a game more important than playing the game, or that a game is the kind of thing that a player could always have reason to stop playing. It is this belief which I would like to question.

Let us consider a golfer, George, so devoted to golf that its pursuit has led him to neglect, to the point of destitution, his wife and six children. Furthermore, although George is aware of the consequences of his mania, he does not regard his family's plight as a good reason for changing his conduct. An advocate of the view that games are *not* serious might

submit George's case as evidence for that view. Since George evidently regards nothing in his life to be more important than golf, golf has, for George, *ceased to be a game*. And this argument would seem to be supported by the complaint of George's wife that golf is for George no longer a game, but a way of life.

But we need not permit George's wife's observation to go unchallenged. The correctness of saying that for George golf is no longer merely a form of recreation may be granted. But to argue that George's golf playing is for that reason not a game is to assume the very point at issue, which is whether a game can be of supreme importance to anyone. Golf, to be sure, is taking over the whole of George's life. But it is, after all, the game which is taking over his life, and not something else. Indeed, if it were not a game which had led George to neglect his duties, his wife might not be nearly as outraged as she is; if, for example, it had been good works, or the attempt to formulate a definition of game playing. She would no doubt still deplore such extra-domestic pre-occupation, but to be kept in rags because of a game must strike her as an altogether different order of deprivation.

Supreme dedication to a game, as in the cases of the auto racer and George, may be repugnant to nearly everyone's moral sense. That may be granted—indeed, insisted upon, since our loathing is excited by the very fact that it is a game which has usurped the place of ends we regard as so much more worthy of pursuit. Thus, although such behaviour may tell us a good deal about such players of games, I submit that it tells us nothing about the games they play. I believe that these observations are sufficient to discredit the thesis that game rules cannot be the object of an ultimate, or unqualified, commitment.

Means, Rather than Rules, as Non-ultimate

I want to agree, however, with the general contention that in games there is something which is significantly non-ultimate, that there is a crucial limitation. But I would like to suggest that it is not the rules which suffer such limitation. Non-ultimacy evidently attaches to games at a quite different point. It is not that obedience to game rules must fall short of ultimate commitments, but that the means which the rules permit must fall short of ultimate utilities. If a high-jumper, for example, failed to complete his jump because he saw that the bar was located at the edge of a precipice, this would no doubt show that jumping over the bar was not the overriding interest of his life. But it would not be his refusal to jump to his death which would reveal his conduct to be a game; it would be his refusal to use something like a ladder

or a catapult in his attempt to clear the bar. The same is true of the dedicated auto racer. A readiness to lose the race rather than kill a child is not what makes the race a game; it is the refusal to, *inter alia*, cut across the infield in order to get ahead of the other contestants. There is, therefore, a sense in which games may be said to be non-serious. One could intelligibly say of the high-jumper who rejects ladders and catapults that he is not serious about getting to the other side of the barrier. But one would also want to point out that he could be deadly serious about getting to the other side of the barrier *without* such aids, that is, about high-jumping. But whether games as such are less serious than other things would seem to be a question which cannot be answered solely by an investigation of games.

Consider a third variant of Snooze's death. In the face of Threat's threat to murder Snooze, I come to the following decision. I choose to limit myself to non-lethal means in order to save Snooze even though lethal means are available to me and I do not regard myself to be bound by any rule which forbids killing. (In the auto racing example the infield would *not* be filled with land mines.) And I make this decision even though it may turn out that the proscribed means are necessary to save Snooze. I thus make my end not simply saving Snooze's life, but saving Snooze's life without killing Threat, even though there appears to be no reason for restricting myself in this way.

One might then ask how such behaviour can be accounted for. And one answer might be that it is unaccountable, that it is simply arbitrary. However, the decision to draw an arbitrary line with respect to permissible means need not itself be an arbitrary decision. The decision to be arbitrary may have a purpose, and the purpose may be to play a game. 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. The gamewright must avoid two extremes. If he draws his lines too loosely the game will be dull because winning will be too easy. As looseness is increased to the point of utter laxity the game simply falls apart, since there are then no rules proscribing available means. (For example, a homing propellant device could be devised which would ensure a golfer a hole in one every time he played.) On the other hand, rules are lines that can be drawn too tightly, so that the game becomes too difficult. And if a line is drawn very tightly indeed the game is squeezed out of existence. (Suppose a game in which the goal is to cross a finish line. One of

the rules requires the contestants to stay on the track, while another rule requires that the finish line be located in such a position that it is impossible to cross it without leaving the track.) The present proposal, therefore, is that games are activities in which rules are inseparable from ends (in the sense agreed to earlier), but with the added qualification that the means permitted by the rules are narrower in range than they would be in the absence of the rules.

Rules Are Accepted for the Sake of the Activity They Make Possible

Still, even if it is true that the function of rules in games is to restrict the permissible means to an end, it does not seem that this is by itself sufficient to exclude things which are not games. When I failed in my attempt to save Snooze's life because of my unwillingness to commit the immoral act of taking a life, the rule against killing functioned to restrict the means I would employ in my efforts to reach a desired end. What, then, distinguishes the cases of the high-jumper and auto racer from my efforts to save Snooze morally, or the efforts of a politician to get elected without lying? The answer lies in the reasons for obeying rules in the two types of case. In games I obey the rules just because such obedience is a necessary condition for my engaging in the activity such obedience makes possible. In high-jumping, as we have noted, although the contestants strive to be on the other side of a barrier, they voluntarily rule out certain means for achieving this goal. They will not walk around it, or duck under it, or use a ladder or catapult to get over it. The goal of the contestants is not to be on the other side of the barrier *per se*, since aside from the game they are playing they are unlikely to have any reason whatever for being on the other side. Their goal is not *simply* to get to the other side, but to do so only by using means permitted by rules, namely, by running from a certain distance and then jumping. And their *reason* for accepting such rules is just because they want to act within the limitations the rules impose. They accept rules so that they can play a game, and they accept these rules so that they can play this game.

But with respect to other rules—for example, moral rules—there is always another reason—what might be called an external or independent reason—for obeying whatever rule may be at issue. In behaving morally, we deny ourselves the option of killing a Threat or lying to the voters not because such denial provides us, like a high-jumper's bar, with an activity we would not otherwise have available to us, but because, quite aside from such considerations, we judge killing and lying to be wrong. The honest politician is not honest because he is interested primarily in the activity trying-to-get-elected-without-lying (as though he valued

his commitment to honesty because it provided him with an interesting challenge), but for quite different reasons. He may, for example, be a Kantian, who believes that it is wrong, under any circumstances whatever, to lie. And so, since his morality requires him to be truthful in all cases, it requires him to be truthful in this case. Or he may be a moral teleologist, who believes that the consequences of dishonesty (either in this case or in general) work against practical possibilities which are in the long run more desirable than the possibility of being elected to office. But the high-jumper does not accept rules for either of these kinds of reasons. He does not on principle always make things harder for himself; he does not even on principle always make surmounting physical barriers harder for himself. He does these things only when he wants to be engaged in high-jumping. Nor does the high-jumper, *qua* high-jumper, deny himself the use of more efficient means for clearing the bar because of higher priority moral claims (the catapult is being used to defend the town just now, or the ladder is being used to rescue a child from a rooftop), but just because, again, he wants to be high-jumping. In morals obedience to rules makes the action right, but in games it makes the action.

Of course it is not moral rules alone which differ from game rules in this respect. More generally, we may contrast the way that rules function in games with two other ways that rules function. 1) Rules can be directives useful in seeking a given end (If you want to improve your drive, keep your eye on the ball), or 2) they can be externally imposed limitations on the means that may be chosen in seeking an end (Do not lie to the public in order to get them to vote for you). In the latter way a moral rule, as we have seen, often functions as a limiting condition upon a technical activity, although a supervening technical activity can produce the same kind of limitation (If you want to get to the airport in time, drive fast, but if you want to arrive safely, don't drive too fast). Consider a ruled sheet of paper. I conform to these rules, when writing, in order to write straight. This illustrates the first kind of rule. Now suppose that the rules are not lines on a piece of paper, but paper walls which form a labyrinth, and while I wish to be out of the labyrinth I do not wish to damage the walls. The walls are limiting conditions on my coming to be outside. This illustrates the second kind of rule. 3) Now returning to games, consider a third case. Again I am in the labyrinth, but my purpose is not just to *be* outside (as it might be if Ariadne were waiting for me to emerge), but to *get* out of the labyrinth, so to speak, labyrinthically. What is the status of the walls? It is clear that they are not simply impediments to my being outside the labyrinth, because it is not my purpose to (simply) be

outside. For if a friend suddenly appeared overhead in a helicopter I would decline the offer of a lift, although I would accept it in the second case. My purpose is to get out of the labyrinth only by accepting the conditions it imposes, that is, by responding to the challenge it presents. Nor, of course, is this like the first case. There I was not interested in *seeing whether* I could write a sentence without breaking a rule, but in using the rules so that I could write straight.

We may therefore say that games require obedience to rules which limit the permissible means to a sought end, and where such rules are obeyed just so that such activity can occur.

Winning Is Not the End with Respect to Which Rules Limit Means

There is, however, a final difficulty. To describe rules as operating more or less permissively with respect to means seems to conform to the ways in which we *invent* or *revise* games. But it does not seem to make sense at all to say that in games there are always means available for attaining one's end over and above the means permitted by the rules. Consider chess. The end sought by chess players, it would seem, is to win, which involves getting chess pieces onto certain squares in accordance with the rules of chess. But since to break a rule is to fail to attain that end, what other means are available? It was for just this reason that our very first proposal about the nature of games was rejected: using a golf club in order to play golf is not a less efficient, and therefore an alternative, means for seeking the end in question. It is a logically indispensable means.

The objection can be met, I believe, by pointing out that there is an end in chess analytically distinct from winning. Let us begin again, therefore, from a somewhat different point of view and say that the end in chess is, in a very restricted sense, to place your pieces on the board in such an arrangement that the opponent's king is, in terms of the rules of chess, immobilized. Now, without going outside chess we may say that the means for bringing about this state of affairs consist in moving the chess pieces. The rules of chess, of course, state how the pieces may be moved; they distinguish between legal and illegal moves. Since the knight, for example, is permitted to move in only a highly restricted manner, it is clear that the permitted means for moving the knight are of less scope than the possible means for moving him. It should not be objected at this point that other means for moving the knight—e.g., along the diagonals—are not really possible on the grounds that such use of the knight would break a rule and thus not be a means to winning. For the present point is not that such use of the

knight would be a means to winning, but that it would be a possible (though not permissible) way in which to move the knight so that he would, for example, come to occupy a square so that, according to the rules of chess, the king would be immobilized. A person who made such a move would not, of course, be playing chess. Perhaps he would be cheating at chess. By the same token I would not be playing a game if I abandoned my arbitrary decision not to kill Threat while at the same time attempting to save Snooze. Chess and my third effort to save Snooze's life are games because of an "arbitrary" restriction of means permitted in pursuit of an end.

The main point is that the end here in question is not the end of winning the game. There must be an end which is distinct from winning because it is the restriction of means to this other end which makes winning possible and also defines, in any given game, what it means to win. In defining a game we shall therefore have to take into account these two ends and, as we shall see in a moment, a third end as well. First there is the end which consists simply in a certain state of affairs: a juxtaposition of pieces on a board, saving a friend's life, crossing a finish line. Then, when a restriction of means for attaining this end is made with the introduction of rules, we have a second end, winning. Finally, with the stipulation of what it means to win, a third end emerges: the activity of trying to win—that is, playing the game.

And so when at the outset we entertained the possibility that games involved the selection of inefficient means, we were quite right. It is just that we looked for such inefficiency in the wrong place. Games do not require us to operate inefficiently with respect to winning, to be sure. But they do require us to operate inefficiently in trying to achieve that state of affairs which counts as winning only when it is accomplished according to the rules of the game. For the way in which those rules function is to prohibit use of the most efficient means for achieving that state of affairs.

The Definition

My conclusion is that to play a game is to engage in 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.

"Well, Skepticus," concluded the Grasshopper, "what do you think?"

"I think," I replied, "that you have produced a definition which is quite plausible."

"But untested. I shall therefore ask you, Skepticus, to bend all of your considerable sceptical efforts to discrediting the definition. For if the definition can withstand the barrage of

objections I believe I can count upon you to launch against it, then perhaps we shall be justified in concluding that the account is not merely plausible, but substantially correct. Will you help me with that task?"

"Gladly, Grasshopper," I replied, "if you will give me a moment to collect myself. For I feel as if we, too, had just succeeded in finding our way out of a complicated maze. I know that we have finally got clear, but I am quite unable to say how we managed to do it, for our correct moves are hopelessly confused in my mind with the false starts and blind alleys which formed so large a part of our journey. Just trying to think back over the twists and turns of the argument makes me quite light-headed."

"What you are describing, Skepticus, is a chronic but minor ailment of philosophers. It is called dialectical vertigo, and its cure is the immediate application of straightforward argumentation. In terms of your metaphor, you need to be suspended, as it were, over the maze, so that you can discriminate at a glance the true path from the false turnings. Let me try to give you such an overview of the argument."

"By all means," I said.

A more direct approach to games [continued the Grasshopper] can be made by identifying what might be called the *elements* of game-playing. Since games are goal-directed activities which involve choice, ends and means are two of the elements of games. But in addition to being means-end-oriented activities, games are also rule-governed activities, so that rules are a third element. And since, as we shall see, the rules of games make up a rather special kind of rule, it will be necessary to take account of one more element, namely, the attitudes of game players *qua* game players. I add '*qua* game players' because I do not mean what might happen to be the attitude of this or that game player under these or those conditions (e.g., the hope of winning a cash prize or the satisfaction of exhibiting physical prowess to an admiring audience), but the attitude without which it is not possible to play a game. Let us call this attitude, of which more presently, the *lusory* (from the Latin *ludus*, game) attitude.

My task will be to persuade you that what I have called the *lusory* attitude is the element which unifies the other elements into a single formula which successfully states the necessary and sufficient conditions for any activity to be an instance of game playing. I propose, then, that the elements of a game are 1) the goal, 2) the means of achieving the goal, 3) the rules, and 4) the *lusory* attitude. I shall briefly discuss each of these in order.

The Goal

We should notice first of all that there are three distinguishable goals involved in game playing. Thus, if we were to ask a long-distance runner his purpose in entering a race, he might say any one or all of three things, each of which would be accurate, appropriate, and consistent with the other two. He might reply 1) that his purpose is to participate in a long-distance race, or 2) that his purpose is to win the race, or 3) that his purpose is to cross the finish line ahead of the other contestants. It should be noted that these responses are not merely three different formulations of one and the same purpose. Thus, winning a race is not the same thing as crossing a finish line ahead of the other contestants, since it is possible to do the latter unfairly by, for example, cutting across the infield. Nor is participating in the race the same as either of these, since the contestant, while fully participating, may simply fail to cross the finish line first, either by fair means or foul. That there must be this triplet of goals in games will be accounted for by the way in which lusory attitude is related to rules and means. For the moment, however, it will be desirable to select just one of the three kinds of goal for consideration, namely, the kind illustrated in the present example by crossing the finish line ahead of the other contestants. This goal is literally the simplest of the three, since each of the others presupposes it, while it does not presupposes either of the other two. This goal, therefore, has the best claim to be regarded as an elementary component of game playing. The others, since they are compounded components, can be defined only after the disclosure of additional elements.

The kind of goal at issue, then, is the kind illustrated by crossing a finish line first (but not necessarily fairly), having x number of tricks piled up before you on a bridge table (but not necessarily as a consequence of playing bridge), or getting a golf ball into a cup (but not necessarily by using a golf club). This kind of goal may be described generally as *a specific achievable state of affairs*. This description is, I believe, no more and no less than is required. By omitting to say *how* the state of affairs in question is to be brought about, it avoids confusion between this goal and the goal of winning. And because any achievable state of affairs whatever could, with sufficient ingenuity, be made the goal of a game, the description does not include too much. I suggest that this kind of goal be called the *prelusory* goal of a game, because it can be described before, or independently of, any game of which it may be, or come to be, a part. In contrast, winning can be described only in terms of the game in which it figures, and winning may accordingly be called the *lusory* goal of a game. Finally, the goal of participating

in the game is not, strictly speaking, a part of the game at all. It is simply one of the goals that people have, such as wealth, glory, or security. As such it may be called a lusory goal, but a lusory goal of life rather than of games.

Means

Just as we saw that reference to the goal of game playing admitted of three different (but proper and consistent) interpretations, so we shall find that the means in games can be of more than one kind—two, in fact, depending upon whether we wish to refer to means for winning the game or for achieving the prelusory goal. Thus, an extremely effective way to achieve the prelusory goal in a boxing match—viz., “the state of affairs consisting in your opponent being “down” for the count of ten—is to shoot him through the head, but this is obviously not a means for winning the match. In games, of course, we are interested only in means which are permitted for winning, and we are now in a position to define that class of means, which we may call *lusory* means. Lusory means are means which are permitted (are legal or legitimate) in the attempt to achieve prelusory goals.

It should be noticed that we have been able to distinguish lusory from, if you will, illusory means only by assuming without analysis one of the elements necessary in making the distinction. We have defined lusory means as means which are *permitted* without examining the nature of that permission. This omission will be repaired directly by taking up the question of rules.

Rules

As with goals and means, two kinds of rules figure in games, one kind associated with prelusory goals, the other with lusory goals. The rules of a game are, in effect, proscriptions of certain means useful in achieving prelusory goals. Thus it is useful but proscribed to trip a competitor in a foot race. This kind of rule may be called constitutive of the game, since such rules together with specification of the prelusory goal set out all the conditions which must be met in playing the game (though not, of course, in playing the game skilfully). Let us call such rules *constitutive* rules. The other kind of rule operates, so to speak, *within* the area circumscribed by constitutive rules, and this kind of rule may be called a rule of skill. Examples are the familiar injunctions to keep your eye on the ball, to refrain from trumping your partner’s ace, and the like. To break a rule of skill is usually to fail, at least to that extent, to play the game well, but to break a constitutive rule is to fail (at least in that respect) to play the game at all. (There is a third

kind of rule in some games which appears to be unlike either of these. It is the kind of rule whose violation results in a fixed penalty, so that violating the rule is neither to fail to play the game nor [necessarily] to fail to play the game well, since it is sometimes tactically correct to incur such a penalty [e.g., in hockey] for the sake of the advantage gained. But these rules and the lusory consequences of their violation are established by the constitutive rules and are simply extensions of them.)

Having made the distinction between constitutive rules and rules of skill, I propose to ignore the latter, since my purpose is to define not well-played games but games. It is, then, what I have called constitutive rules which determine the kind and range of means which will be permitted in seeking to achieve the prelusory goal.

What is the nature of the restrictions which constitutive rules impose on the means for reaching a prelusory goal? I invite you, Skepticus, to think of any game at random. Now identify its prelusory goal: breasting a tape, felling an opponent, or whatever. I think you will agree that the simplest, easiest, and most direct approach to achieving such a goal is always ruled out in favour of a more complex, more difficult, and more indirect approach. Thus, it is not uncommon for players of a new and difficult game to agree among themselves to 'ease up' on the rules, that is, to allow themselves a greater degree of latitude than the official rules permit. This means removing some of the obstacles or, in terms of means, permitting certain means which the rules do not really permit. On the other hand, players may find some game too easy and may choose to tighten up the rules, that is, to heighten the difficulties they are required to overcome.

We may therefore define constitutive rules as rules which prohibit use of the most efficient means for reaching a prelusory goal.

Lusory Attitude

The attitude of the game player must be an element in game playing because there has to be an explanation of that curious state of affairs wherein one adopts rules which require one to employ worse rather than better means for reaching an end. Normally the acceptance of prohibitory rules is justified on the grounds that the means ruled out, although they are more efficient than the permitted means, have further undesirable consequences from the viewpoint of the agent involved. Thus, although nuclear weapons are more efficient than conventional weapons in winning battles, the view still happily persists among nations that the additional consequences of nuclear assault are sufficient to rule it out. This kind of thing, of course,

happens all the time, from the realm of international strategy to the common events of everyday life; thus one decisive way to remove a toothache is to cut your head off, but most people find good reason to rule out such highly efficient means. But in games although more efficient means are—and must be—ruled out, the reason for doing so is quite different from the reasons for avoiding nuclear weaponry and self-decapitation. Foot racers do not refrain from cutting across the infield because the infield holds dangers for them, as would be the case if, for example, infields were frequently sown with land mines. Cutting across the infield is shunned solely because there is a rule against it. But in ordinary life this is usually—and rightly—regarded as the worst possible kind of justification one could give for avoiding a course of action. The justification for prohibiting a course of action that there is simply a rule against it may be called the *bureaucratic* justification; that is, no justification at all.

But aside from bureaucratic practice, in anything but a game the gratuitous introduction of unnecessary obstacles to the achievement of an end is regarded as a decidedly irrational thing to do, whereas in games it appears to be an absolutely essential thing to do. This fact about games has led some observers to conclude that there is something inherently absurd about games, or that games must involve a fundamental paradox.¹ This kind of view seems to me to be mistaken. The mistake consists in applying the same standard to games that is applied to means-end activities which are not games. If playing a game is regarded as not essentially different from going to the office or writing a cheque, then there is certainly something absurd or paradoxical or, more plausibly, simply something stupid about game playing.

But games are, I believe, essentially different from the ordinary activities of life, as perhaps the following exchange between Smith and Jones will illustrate. Smith knows nothing of games, but he does know that he wants to travel from A to C, and he also knows that making the trip by way of B is the most efficient means for getting to his destination. He is then told authoritatively that he may *not* go by way of B “Why not?” he asks. “Are there dragons at B?” “No,” is the reply. “B is perfectly safe in every respect. It is just that there is a rule against going to B if you are on your way to C.” “Very well,” grumbles Smith, “if you insist. But if I have to go from A to C very often I shall certainly try very hard to get that rule revoked.” True to his word, Smith approaches Jones, who is also setting out for C from A. He asks Jones to sign a petition requesting the revocation of the rule which forbids travellers from A to C to go through B. Jones replies that he is very much opposed to revoking the rule, which very much puzzles Smith.

SMITH: But if you want to get to C, why on earth do you support a rule which prevents your taking the fastest and most convenient route?

JONES: Ah, but you see I have no particular interest in being at C. That is not my goal, except in a subordinate way. My overriding goal is more complex. It is "to get from A to C without going through B." And I can't very well achieve that goal if I go through B, can I?

S: But why do you want to do that?

J: I want to do it before Robinson does, you see?

S: No, I don't. That explains nothing. Why should Robinson, whoever he maybe, want to do it? I presume you will tell me that he, like you, has only a subordinate interest in being at C at al.

J: That is so.

S: Well if neither of you really wants to be at C, then what possible difference can it make which of you gets there first? And why, for God's sake, should you avoid B?

J: Let me ask you a question. Why do you want to get to C?

S: Because there is a good concert at C, and I want to hear it.

J: Why?

S: Because I like concerts, of course. Isn't that a good reason?

J: It's one of the best there is. And I like, among other things, trying to get from A to C without going through B before Robinson does.

S: Well, I don't. So why should they tell me I can't go through B?

J: Oh, I see. They must have thought you were in the race.

S: The what?

I believe that we are now in a position to define *lusory attitude*: the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur.

The Definition

Let me conclude by restating the definition together with an indication of where the elements that we have now defined fit into the statement.

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]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

"Thank you, Grasshopper," I said when he had finished speaking. "Your treatment has completely cured my vertigo, and I believe I have a sufficiently clear understanding of your definition to raise a number of objections against it."

"Splendid. I knew I could rely upon you."

"My objections will consist in the presentation of counter-examples which reveal the definition to be inadequate in either of the two respects in which definitions can be inadequate; that is, they will show either that the definition is too broad or that it is too narrow."

"By the definition's being too broad I take it you mean that it erroneously includes things which are *not* games, and by its being too narrow you mean that it erroneously excludes things which *are* games."

"That is correct," I answered.

"And which kind of error will you expose first, Skepticus, an error of inclusion or an error of exclusion?"

"An error of exclusion, Grasshopper. I shall argue that your account of the prelusory goal has produced too narrow a definition."

Note

1. See Chapter Seven, "Games and Paradox," for an extended discussion of this point.