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What is a Metagame?

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Abstract

The concept of metagames can be of use to philosophers of sport and games. However, the term "metagame" is used throughout the literature in several different, distinct senses, few of which are clearly defined, and as a result there remains ambiguity about what, precisely, this term means. In this paper, I attempt to disambiguate the term metagame. I have come across at least four different senses of "metagame" in academic literature about games. Of these four senses, most relevant to philosophers of sport and games is what I have termed "ludic" metagames. Ludic metagames involve playing a game "on top of" another game. I attempt to spell out this concept in particular detail, distinguishing it from related – but distinct – ways in which the formal features of a game can be modified without giving rise to metagames.

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1. Introduction

The concept of metagames can be of use to philosophers of sport and games. However, the term 'metagame' is used throughout the literature in several different, distinct senses, few of which are clearly defined, and as a result there remains ambiguity about what, precisely, this term means (Carter, Gibbs, and Harropp 2014; Kokkinakis et al. 2021; Moul and Nye 2009; Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Stenros and Waern 2011; Thorne 2021). For example, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's otherwise excellent recent book on metagames at times discusses metagames in a social sense—for instance when they argue that 'From the most complex house rules, arcade cultures, competitive tournaments, and virtual economies to the simple decision to press start, pass the controller, use a player's guide, or even purchase a game in the first place, for all intents and purposes metagames are the only kind of games that we play' (Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 3); at other times at an intertextual sense, when discussing the way we draw on a history of play in constructing new games (Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 1–2); and also sometimes slides into an analysis of the ways in which video game equipment can be considered tools for the creation of ludic metagames (Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 9); without a clear acknowledgment that these are all different—even if related—phenomena. Similarly, Scott Donaldson's paper—'Towards a Typology of Metagames' (Donaldson 2016)—discusses 'the relationship between the game and outside elements' (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 481) without, in my view, recognising the quite distinct forms that this relationship can

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take (in this case, he tends to view the social aspects of a game solely via their impact on game strategy).

In this paper, I attempt to disambiguate the term metagame. I have come across at least four different senses of 'metagame' in academic literature about games. While these different senses appear to have some kind of commonality—we might describe them, for instance, as all involving 'how the game interfaces outside of itself' (Garfield 2000)—the various senses refer to different phenomena. Of these four senses, most relevant to philosophers of sport and games is what I have termed 'ludic' metagames. Ludic metagames involve playing a game 'on top of' another game. I attempt to spell out this concept in particular detail, distinguishing it from related—but distinct—ways in which the formal features of a game can be modified without giving rise to metagames.

I therefore have two main goals in this paper. First, I want to disambiguate the various senses of 'metagame' as the term is used in the literature. Even if different senses of metagame relate to each other in some way, without first being clear on the different ways this term can be understood and the different phenomena to which it can refer, we can't speak precisely about what those relationships might be.

Second, by clarifying the concept of ludic metagames—and how ludic metagames are different from other game modifications—we can understand better the different ways in which games can be built on top of existing gaming practices. In particular, this may help those working on the phenomenon of 'gamification' to more precisely understand the different ways in which gamification can occur recursively. 'Gamification' refers to the 'use of game design elements in non-game contexts' (Deterding et al. 2011, 2)"; or the 'adding [of] games or game-like elements to some activity to encourage participation' (Hurych 2021, 51), with the aim of 'transplant[ing] some of the motivational qualities of games into contexts that are not inherently leisure-focused or motivating in themselves' (Raczkowski 2014, 141).

Given gamification's connections to marketing and public relations (Zichermann and Linder 2010)—its interest in 'maximising the activity of the users, and potentially turning them into "better" customers, or unpaid contributors to their business' and its tendency to 'prey on affective and emotional needs for quantifiable achievement and re-value "play" as a mere product promotion strategy' (Dragona 2014, 260)—gamification (or, more derisely, 'exploitationware' [Bogost 2011]) is the frequent subject of criticism. While some have argued that gamification can be a positive part of life (Kin 2011; McGonigal 2011; Nicholson 2013; Rapp 2013), it would be difficult to deny that gamification is frequently put to questionable purposes.

With this in mind, one possible use to which a more detailed understanding of ludic metagames might be put (though I won't develop the idea in this paper) is in the context of 'counter-gamification'. Counter-gamification has been described as 'a form of opposition to the increasing use of game elements within non-game systems, which aims to disrupt the processing and exploitation of users' data' (Dragona 2014, 239). While most forms of counter-gamification involve more-or-less direct opposition to gamification (Dragona 2014, 240–243), an under-theorised form of counter-gamification is what I call 're-gamification', or the gamifying of gamified systems in line with the player's own goals and interests. This is similar to Marcus Carter's concept of 'paragaming', or play that is structured by a player's own desires and motivations (Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop 2012) rather than the goals of the game creator. This idea also relates to Woodcock and

Johnson's 'gamification-from-below' (Woodcock and Johnson 2018) as a form of 'playful resistance' (Hurych 2021, 59). A comprehensive understanding of the nature of metagames and the different ways in which games can be reconfigured through recursive or second-order gamification might help, among other things, to develop these forms of counter-gamification in more detail.

In the first section of this paper, I focus on disambiguating the four different senses of the term 'metagame' that are found in the literature[1]: social, strategic, intertextual and ludic.

Then, from section two to section five, I attempt to clarify the meaning of 'ludic metagame' through a conceptual analysis of the formal features of games in a broadly Suitsian sense. Suits defines games as:

> [attempting] 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]. (2005, 54–5)

There are various different ways in which rules, goals and attitudes can be modified. Some of these modifications give rise to ludic metagames (specifically, when a new lusory goal is created with what I refer to as a 'metalusory attitude'), whereas other alterations fall short of creating a metagame (in the sense of a 'game on top of a game'). In sections two to five, I develop the concept of ludic metagames by contrasting it with various ways in which rules, goals and attitudes can be changed that do not lead to ludic metagames.

Specifically, in section two, in order to see how ludic metagames differ from games *simpliciter*, I contrast ludic metagames with 'mere' games built on top of an existing non-game activity (in other words, the 'gamification' of everyday practices). I suggest that metagames are games that require a 'base' game (not an everyday activity) and that accept the constitutive rules of that 'base' game, while adding an additional, independently-valued goal that is in tension with the goal of the base game (possibly including some additional constitutive rules relating to that goal).

In the third section, I contrast metagames to activities that may seem to be metagames, but that are actually different ways of modifying mere games: 'alternative' games —games in which either the constitutive rules or goal of the game have been globally modified (that is, modified for all players); and 'countergames' – games in which the constitutive rules of the base game are abandoned, even though there is a pretence of continuing to play the base game.

In the fourth section, I discuss a form of game that is similar to ludic metagames —action-restricted games—in which rules have been modified, but where an alternative game has not been created. This can occur, I argue, where 'action rules' in a game—rules that relate to what actions players may perform and how they may do so—are voluntary made more restrictive for some, but not all, players. These kinds of modifications to the action rules of the game by a subset of players give rise to a form of game which seems very much like a metagame, but is subtly different (though I am agnostic as to whether we should consider action-restricted games as a sub-class of ludic metagame or as a different game-form entirely).

I argue that the difference between metagames and action-restricted games comes down to what I call the 'metalusory attitude' of the players, which amounts whether the players view the action-restriction as an independent goal, or merely as an additional challenge. If players possess the metalusory attitude, the game is a metagame; if not, it's an action-restricted game.

Finally, I show how the metalusory attitude can be used to distinguish between metagames, 'subgames' – games with their own rules and goal that are played within a base game, but that feed back into the base game and that therefore plays an instrumental role vis-à-vis the base game—and nested games (Kolers 2018), or games in which one level of game constitutes another game at a higher level in a part-whole sense.

2. Kinds of metagame

At the most general level, we can understand metagames as activities that are separate from a game, but that are *about* or *tied* to that game in some way. With this extremely broad and ambiguous definition as a starting point, we can identify at least four different senses of the term 'metagame' as it's used in the literature.

2.1. Social metagames

One sense of metagame is about the 'sociability in and around a game' (Stenros and Waern 2011, 2). That is, the activities that people engage in that take the game as their focus. This can include the norms of social play, the communities that exist around games, and the kinds of attitudes that players have towards the game. We can call this the 'social' definition of metagame.

So, for instance, Richard Garfield has referred to metagames as 'how a game interfaces with life' (Garfield 2000, 16). Donaldson expands on this: social metagames involve 'what players bring to a game, what players take away from a game, what happens between games, and what happens during a game' (Donaldson 2016, 1). The social metagame has been described by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman as involving 'the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played' (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 481).

2.2. Strategic metagames

Second, 'metagame' is sometimes taken to refer to the ways, 'external to the game's environment, [that] a player can affect the outcome of a game' (Kokkinakis et al. 2021, 1). This sense of metagame focuses on the higher-level decision making of the players, and emphasises

> popular strategies or overarching way of play that appears optimised for an individual player or team based on both their perceived strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their respective opponents, using information contained both in and outside the game and its surrounding environment. (e.g., tournament structure) (Kokkinakis et al. 2021, 2)

An example of a metagame of this kind is outlined in Charles Moul & John Nye, who describe a form of metagame collusion in chess tournaments. Essentially,

> very strong players who wish to collude in round robin formats can improve their performance against other players by agreeing to early or prearranged draws. Assuming for simplicity that the expected outcome of a game between players of equal strength is half a point each, a peaceful pair of agreed draws produces the same outcome with less effort and risk than taking a win and loss apiece. (2009, 11)

This is an example of a metagame, in that it identifies a strategy that encompasses more than just the individual game. However, we may also include under this definition strategising using information gathered about the opposing players' strengths and weaknesses, the particular game arena, predictions based on prior knowledge of the players, and so on. Essentially, any higher-level strategising that includes factors drawn from outside the specific match being played counts as a metagame in this sense. We can call this the 'strategic' definition.

Clearly in practice there are connections between social metagaming and strategic metagaming. For one thing, the non-game factors that players draw on in their strategic metagaming will often be aspects of the social metagame. For instance, Carter, Gibbs, and Harropp (2014) discusses the way in which tabletop wargamers study online forums for the purpose of learning about what play styles are currently popular, with the aim of bucking the trend to gain advantage. Here, the online forums are clearly part of the social metagame, but are being used as part of the strategic metagame as well. We can distinguish between the two by differentiating between the way that game-related activities are fed back into the game in a strategic, instrumental sense, and the game-related activities that are pursued for non-game reasons, e.g. for enjoyment, community-building, friendship, and so on. Social metagaming, then, just is what people do together with the game as its focus, whereas strategic metagaming involves taking those non-game activities and making them a part of game strategy.

2.3. Intertextual metagames

Third, metagames can be "'self-reflexive' games … [or] approaches to game design" (Thorne 2021, 64). In other words, games that are themselves *about* games, that make reference to or comment on other games. Sarah Thorne discusses an example of such a metagame video game, *There is No Game* (Draw Me a Pixel 2020):

> *There Is No Game* is a point-and-click puzzle adventure… Its narrative tells of the adventure of two seemingly unlikely friends, the player and game program, as they are sent spiraling across dimensions, and must work together to return home. Each dimension to which they travel highlights a different game genre, beginning with the form from which the game draws its own aesthetic inspiration, the point-and-click adventure, with later dimensions featuring role-playing games, clicker games, pay-to-play games, and mobile games. Within these dimensions, players will also encounter a number of classic games such as *Breakout* (Atari 1976), *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984), tic-tac-toe, sudoku, *Game & Watch* (Nintendo 1980), and *Minesweeper* (Microsoft 1992). (Thorne 2021, 64)

There Is No Game is a game about other games, that adopts features of them in an explicitly referential manner. We can call this an 'intertextual' metagame.

2.4. Ludic metagames

Finally, there are games that are played on top of games, that use other games as their foundation. Such games take a game as its base, but then add a degree of separation from the original game by creating additional rules and goals to create a new (but simultaneous) activity. For instance, we might imagine a game of baseball in which two players compete with each other to see how many out-of-the-park home runs they can score. This activity takes the base game of baseball as its foundation: unless you are playing baseball in the first place, there is no possibility of scoring a home run. However, the competition between the two players is an additional game that the two players add on the top of the base game. I call this the 'ludic' definition of metagame.

3. Ludic metagames and mere games

Every game[2] admits of the possibility of ludic metagames. Essentially, when we add new goals to a game, we have created a metagame.[3] A 'new' goal in the context of ludic metagames can be thought of as something that the players aim for that has value *independently of* the goal of the 'base' game. (As we're approaching the definition of ludic metagames in a broadly formalist mode, we can remain neutral on precisely what sources of value under the 'independent' goal, or the player's motivations for seeking that goal. There will likely be many different values and motivations at play in different contexts, and this definition of ludic metagame should be consistent with all of them.)

We can illustrate the idea of a game on top of a game by looking initially not at a metagame, but on how ordinary, everyday activities can be transformed into a game (or 'gamification'). For instance, I ride an electric motorcycle to work. I have a goal in doing this: simply, to get between work and home as quickly and easily as possible. But to make the driving more fun, I set myself the additional goal of making the trip to and from work while using a decreasing amount of the battery's charge. So, for instance, my motorcycle's computer tells me that I have charge enough to travel 90 km more before I need to swap the battery out for a new one. I know from Google Maps that the route I take from home to work is 10 km. So, I set myself the goal of getting to work while leaving 81 km left on the battery, meaning that I drew 10% less power than the expected amount for travelling that distance. To accomplish this, I avoid sharp braking (which dissipates my kinetic energy wastefully) and ensure that the most energy possible is recovered by the motorcycle's battery regeneration system (which applies a light break when the throttle is disengaged, converting my kinetic energy back into stored electrical energy) by coasting wherever possible.

My goal of using as little of the battery charge as possible is separate from my goal of getting to work quickly and easily—in fact, it is in tension with those goals, given that I need to concentrate more on driving when playing this game, and that keeping to a moderate speed is one way of using less power. There is also no other practical benefit for me in trying to use my battery efficiently—I pay per kilometre driven, not by energy

used, and while I wish I could claim that I am motivated by environmentalist considerations, the truth is that I do this primarily because it makes the drive more interesting; it adds enjoyment to an otherwise fairly boring activity. Essentially, then, I have gamified my commute by adding an independently valuable goal-in-itself that has nothing essential to do with the base activity (the act of getting to and from work), and that has no purpose aside from play (Suits 1967).

This game—we can call it 'Eco-Driver'—is not itself a metagame. But it provides a basic model for us to understand what a metagame is, and what it means to 'add a goal' to a game. In the same way that Eco Driver builds a game on top of an ordinary activity, a metagame builds a game on top of another game. It is the process of gamifying a game. For instance, imagine a game of Monopoly in which two of the players agree between them to compete over who can build the most hotels: we can call this game 'Hotelier'. In Monopoly, the goal is to be the last players standing, accomplished by bankrupting the other players. Ordinarily, building hotels in Monopoly is valuable in an instrumental sense; it means that other players are forced to pay more when they land on your properties, thereby advancing the goal of bankrupting them. However, in Hotelier, the building of hotels is the *point* of the game: it's intrinsically valuable.[4]

With Eco-Driver, the goal of minimising battery use and the goal of getting to work can co-exist. The fact that I am playing Eco-Driver doesn't mean that I am no longer trying to get to work. In fact, it requires it. Similarly, the goals of Hotelier don't crowd out those of Monopoly—it's possible to play both at the same time—though just as doing well at Eco-Driver can, but doesn't have to, mean doing less well at getting to work efficiently, so can Hotelier conflict with the goal of doing well at Monopoly, in those cases where building a hotel is not the most efficient means to make other players bankrupt. The players who are playing Hotelier as a metagame must *also* simultaneously be playing Monopoly, even though the outcomes in each may come apart, e.g. a player could lose at Monopoly, but console themselves that they nevertheless won at Hotelier (or vice versa).

The key difference between Hotelier and Eco-Driver is that while Eco-Driver has a goal, that goal is itself essentially instrumental, and is not accompanied by constitutive rules. In other words, there is no sense in which driving one way or another *constitutes* the activity of driving to work, except insofar as it affects whether I actually physically get to work or not.[5] By contrast, Monopoly has rules that constitute it *as* an activity; that make it such that if you don't abide by them, you can no longer be said to even be playing Monopoly in the first place. Hotelier also involves a goal that is valued only insofar as it makes the game of Hotelier possible, but Hotelier is parasitic on an activity that itself already has such a goal, and that only exists thanks to the constitutive rules that bring that base game into existence in the first place.

To put the matter another way, lusory goals have two components: a prelusory goal and a set of constitutive rules. The relationship between the lusory goal of a base game like Monopoly and the lusory goal of a metagame like Hotelier is essentially that both accept the constitutive rules of Monopoly (the base game), while aiming at two different prelusory goals. So first we have the lusory goal of Monopoly, and subsequently a new lusory goal is created, which must (to be a metagame) be consistent with the constitutive rules that lie behind the original lusory goal of Monopoly, but which conflicts with the *win conditions*—in a prelusory sense—of the original goal. The person who is playing Hotelier as a metagame therefore accepts that the constitutive rules that constitute the lusory goal

of Monopoly at the same time constitute the lusory goal of Hotelier, even if they are aiming to get to a different prelusory goal via those same constitutive rules (thereby creating a separate *lusory* goal).

4. Alternative games and countergames

A metagame like Hotelier is parasitic on the constitutive rules of Monopoly. In other words, it assumes as its background the rules of Monopoly, which constitute the activity of Hotelier just as much as they constitute the activity of Monopoly. But, unlike changing the *prelusory goal* of a game, changing the *constitutive rules* of a game typically does not give rise to a metagame, but rather creates an alternative game. In other words, if you change the constitutive rules of the game, while you no longer have the *same* game, what you do *not* have is a game on top of a game: a metagame. This is because metagames require that there be two games being played simultaneously: there must be the base game, and a metagame being played on top of that base game. Changes to constitutive rules of the base game create a new activity—a new (alternative) game—but that activity is adjacent to, rather than on top of, the original game: you can't play the original game and the alternative game simultaneously.

At the same time, we need to be careful about what it means to play games 'simultaneously', as there are games that may appear to be simultaneous but are actually not: what we can call 'countergames'. For example, take Pickpocket Chess. In Pickpocket Chess, the goal is to take all the opposing player's pawns from the board without the player noticing, e.g. by distracting the player and slipping the pawn into your pocket, etc. If you can remove all the other player's pawns without them noticing, you win; if they catch you, you lose.

While it may *appear* that a player of Pickpocket Chess is playing chess, they are not abiding by the constitutive rules of chess—such as the rules about how pieces can be moved and the conditions under which they can be taken from the board—so they are not *really* playing chess: playing chess is merely a pretence. Because the constitutive rules of Pickpocket Chess directly conflict with the constitutive rules of chess, a player can only ever be playing chess *or* Pickpocket Chess, never both at the same time.

Metagames therefore can arise *only* in cases where a new lusory goal is created, and where that goal is pursued *through* the constitutive rules of the base game. How a player weighs up the competing lusory goals of the base game and the metagame is up to them. For instance, imagine a game called Second Base, in which my goal is to get to second base in a softball match every time I'm up to bat. Sometimes I might need to choose between aiming to win softball or aiming to win Second Base (trying for second base may make it more likely that I'll get out than if I had stopped safely on first, for example). But though it may be *strategically unwise* in softball to try for second base rather than staying on first, in attempting to do so I don't cease to play softball. So long as I am pursuing both goals *simultaneously*—at least to some extent, no matter how I weigh those goals when they pull in opposite directions—and so long as I am abiding by the constitutive rules of the base game *and* the constitutive rules of the additional game, then I am playing a metagame.

Of course, even if we can't abandon the rules of the base game, we can (and arguably *must*) create *additional* constitutive rules that apply only to the metagame, though the

metagame constitutive rules cannot contradict the constitutive rules of the base game. For instance, I might decide that running between bases in Second Base only counts if I slide into second base. Because sliding is permitted (but not required) within the constitutive rules of softball, I am free to turn sliding into a requirement in Second Base, as changing a permitted rule to a required one still allows me to play both softball and Second Base simultaneously. By contrast, I couldn't add a rule to Second Base that I can run directly to second base, skipping first base entirely. As soon as I applied such a rule, I would cease to be playing softball—I would merely be playing Second Base as a countergame—and Second Base would therefore no longer be a game *on top of* the game of softball.

5. Action-restricted games

There is one possible exception to the claim that modifying constitutive rules always gives rise to alternative games. To understand this exception, we need to distinguish between two different kinds of constitutive rules: the rules that govern actions (action rules), and the rules that constitute the goal itself (definitional rules). Action rules are always a prescriptive/proscriptive pair. For example, the rules about the bowling movement in cricket, e.g. bowl with a straight arm, with the front foot planted before the batting crease, etc., can be understood—in a prescriptive sense—as telling you what you *should* do; but they can also be redescribed in a proscriptive way: *don't* bend your arm, *don't* let your front foot land forward of the batting crease, etc.

By contrast, definitional rules, rules that constitute a game goal, are not about how you should *act*, but rather are about what that goal or game concept *is* or *means*. For instance, the goal of cricket is getting the highest number on the scoreboard. In order to do this, the teams need to get 'runs'. What is a run? It is a point that can be achieved in various different ways, such as when the batters both successfully run from one end of the pitch to the other under certain conditions, or when the ball is struck to or over the boundary under certain conditions. This kind of constitutive rule, therefore, defines what the concept of 'run' is in the first place, and runs themselves are a key constitutive part of the goal of the game of cricket.

If definitional rules are modified—if we modify the definition of what a run is in cricket, or a goal is in soccer, or an innings in baseball—we inevitably have an alternative game. This is frequently true when it comes to action rules as well: for instance, when the action rule in soccer was modified such that the goalkeeper could no longer pick the ball up when receiving an intentional pass from their own team, this change gave rise to an alternative game.

However, there is an important difference between action rules and definition rules: groups of players can add additional action rules in isolation from other players in the same game, whereas definitional rules *must* be shared by all players for the game to function in the first place. For example, we can imagine a game of tennis in which one player decides to add an additional rule to the game—for herself only—that she is not allowed to put two hands on the racquet, thereby ruling out double-handed backhands as a permissible action: we can call this modified game One-Handed Tennis. This is an instance of an action rule that can be applied only to some players, those players that choose to play tennis with this additional constraint.

By contrast, it's simply not possible for different players to have different definitions of, e.g. what constitutes a goal in ice hockey, or a run in baseball, or checkmate in chess. For instance, in order to determine whether a goal has been scored or not in ice hockey, there has to be a shared understanding of the circumstances under which that state obtains. If players have different views about what does and does not count as a goal, the game itself breaks down. For the game to continue, they would need to once again reach a collective understanding about what counts as a goal. This may be through discussion or may by appeal to a higher authority. Either way, a consensus interpretation of the definitional rules is required for the game to exist in the first place.

But consensus isn't necessarily required when it comes to action rules. There can be changes to action rules that apply only to *sub-groups* of players—self-imposed rules or rules of collective agreement that they add on to the base constitutive rules of the game.

Two things to note here, however. First, as with sliding in Second Base, changes to action rules can only ever make the rules more restrictive, never more permissive. A cricket bowler could never, for instance, decide on his own to start bowling with a bent arm (which is against the rules of cricket); though he could easily decide to start bowling with a self-imposed limitation on his run-up (about which there are no existing restrictions in the rules).

Second, once the additional action rule is adopted by *all* players, then we once again have a situation in which an alternative game has been created, as the earlier example of the soccer goalkeeper shows. Only when the rule is adopted by a *subset* of the players alone can we avoid saying that an alternative game has been created.

At the same time, I don't think that this is exactly the same as a ludic metagame. We can modify the action rules of a game without this constituting a new game-within -a-game. Hence, rather than being a situation involving a base game and a metagame, I argue that cases where a subset of players modify action rules gives rise to an 'action-restricted game'. Of course, we might wonder whether we can truly distinguish between cases where only action rules have been modified and the lusory goal remains the same, and cases in which the modification to the action rules itself constitutes a new lusory goal (which *would* give rise to a metagame). However, I think we can make this distinction by focusing on player *attitude*.

For Suits, a game is only a game if the players have a lusory attitude towards the activity. A player might, for instance, adopt a strategic attitude towards a game in which her goal is to gain the prize money. Such a person will do whatever it takes—including breaking the rules of the game, if she thinks she can get away with it—to accomplish this goal. It may so happen that *going along with* the rules of the game gives her the best chance of success. But, if the motivation for following the rules is purely instrumental—if the point isn't to *play the game* but to manipulate the situation so as to bring about a state of affairs external to the game itself, i.e. receiving the prize money—then it seems at least plausible to claim that she isn't *playing the game* at all.[6]

What's particularly noteworthy about the lusory attitude in our present context is that in practice in some cases there is absolutely no way of establishing whether someone is *really* playing a game or merely appearing to do so. For example, we can imagine two scenarios, one in which the player is abiding by the rules of poker for the sake of the game, and one in which he does so instrumentally. When these two players are asked whether they are following the rules for the sake of the game itself, in both cases the player says

that he absolutely is (even though in one case this is untrue). And because it turns out that the best way of winning the prize money is to go along with the rules, the player does not cheat in the second case; in fact, both players perform identical actions in every respect. From an external perspective, there is no observable difference between these two games. Yet, from Suits' perspective (plausibly, I think) one player is *playing* poker, and the other isn't.

I think something similar is going on in the case of metagames vs. action-restricted games. Both of course require a lusory attitude: they are both sub-categories of the broader category 'game', after all. But they can be distinguished from each other in that metagames require what we might call a 'metalusory attitude'. A metalusory attitude is about whether the player *thinks of* the changes to the game as constituting a new goal, separate from that of the base game, rather than as a mere restriction on how they might pursue the goal of the base game.

Imagine two activities: One-Handed Tennis^{a} – an action-restricted game in which the players cannot use both hands, but that lacks an independent *goal* of winning without using two hands; and One-Handed Tennis^{m} – a metagame in which players are aiming to win tennis without using two hands. In One-Handed Tennis^{m}, the player considers the restriction on using two hands as constituting the goal of 'winning-tennis-while-using-only-one-hand'. This goal is a goal-in-itself and can be sought independently of the goal of winning tennis (in principle in this case, obviously it can't be sought independently in practice). That is, if she won tennis while using only one hand, she would describe that as winning tennis *and* winning One-Handed Tennis: as winning the base game *and* the metagame.

By contrast, a player playing One-Handed Tennis^{a} has as their *single* goal 'winning tennis while using only one handed' (*sans* hyphens). They conceptualise the restriction of using only one hand as an additional challenge,[7] rather than as a separate game. As a result, if they were to win tennis while using only one hand, they would be pleased with themselves that they won tennis at a 'higher difficulty level' (or more beautifully, creatively, etc.); but they wouldn't consider this as winning a *separate* game from the base game of tennis.

Of course, *in practice*, by observation alone, we may be completely unable to determine whether or not a player is playing One-Handed Tennis^{m} or One-Handed Tennis^{a}. But nonetheless, these two activities *are* different, due to the different attitudes that the players have towards them. Hence, we can distinguish between metagames like One-Handed Tennis^{m} and action-restricted games like One-Handed Tennis^{a} on the basis of the presence or absence of a metalusory attitude.

6. Metagames vs. subgames/nested games

The metalusory attitude also helps us to distinguish metagames from what we might call 'subgames'. An example of a potential subgame is Triple Triad, a card game that can be played within the video game *Final Fantasy VIII*. In Triple Triad, players collect playing cards from within the world of *Final Fantasy VIII* through various means, such as gifts from Non-Playable Characters (NPCs), by beating certain enemies, by using a special 'Card' ability during battles to transform the enemy into playing cards, and by beating NPCs at Triple Triad itself. Using these cards, the player can then

challenge most NPCs in the game to a Triple Triad match. The player is then taken to the game within the game—Triple Triad—which is played on a nine-by-nine board, according to a specific set of game rules unrelated to the rest of *Final Fantasy VIII*. Triple Triad seems to be a metagame: it's an entirely optional game (the player can win *Final Fantasy VIII* without playing Triple Triad even once); it cannot be played without also playing *Final Fantasy VIII*; it has its own goal and set of constitutive rules; and those rules don't conflict with the constitutive rules of *Final Fantasy VIII*.

But there is a complication: in *Final Fantasy VIII*, players can gain the ability to transform Triple Triad cards into items that give them an advantage in the base game. Hence, the goal of winning Triple Triad is not *independently valued*; ultimately, it's instrumentally valued as a way of advancing the goal of the base game. In this respect, we might describe Triple Triad as a subgame: it's a game that follows its own distinct set of rules—it's a game within a game—but that, while optional, nonetheless fits into, and is valued in terms of, the goal being pursued in the base game. In this respect, almost all 'minigames' in video games can probably be described as subgames, as can activities such as penalty shoot-outs in soccer.

And yet . . . perhaps we can't describe Triple Triad as either a metagame or a subgame without knowing more about the player's attitude toward it. For instance, to take my own experience of Triple Triad, while playing *Final Fantasy VIII* I did collect Triple Triad cards and would seek out and challenge NPCs to matches. But I didn't once transform—or even consider transforming—any of my cards into items. In terms of how I played Triple Triad, then, nothing about the game fed in any respect back to the base game of *Final Fantasy VIII*; for me, winning Triple Triad was a goal in itself. Another player, by contrast, might take a highly instrumental attitude towards Triple Triad, and see it as a way of gaining access to certain items. Plausibly, then, in my case I was playing a metagame, while the other player was playing a subgame. And the difference ultimately comes down to the metalusory attitude: is the goal valued *by the player* as an independent end-in-itself (as in One-Handed Tennis^{m}), or is it not (as in One Handed Tennis^{a})?

The idea of subgames is closely related to Avery Kolers' concept of 'nested games' (Kolers 2018). A nested game is when we construct a larger game out of practices that are games in their own right. Kolers used the example of the World Tennis Rankings to illustrate this idea. There is an ongoing 'game' in which players attempt to improve their position in the World Tennis Rankings. Every December, new rankings are announced, and so every year players play a closed game in which their goal is to score as high as they can in these year-end rankings. Those year-end rankings are in turn made up of tournaments, which themselves consist in individual matches. Hence, the individual matches are 'nested' within the tournaments, which are nested within the year-long rankings competition, which itself is nested in the open-ended rankings competition (Kolers 2018, 3).

In nested games there is a part-whole relation between each level of game. As Kolers puts it,

> One wins the Rogers Cup *by* winning each round. When the lower order game is part of the higher order game and is played for that reason, playing it ceases to be a complete final end just by itself. But it does not thereby become an *instrumental* end; rather, the lower order game becomes *part*, or *partly constitutive*, of the higher order final end. The lower order final ends together constitute the highest order final end. (2018, 4)

In other words, 'the constitutive rules of one game require you to play another game. That is, one game is a lusory means of another' (Kolers 2018, 3–4).

The only difference between nested games and subgames is that in subgames the game is *purely* instrumentally valuable. However, in nested games, we can value—like in metagames—the lower-level game non-instrumentally. But unlike in metagames, there is no *conflict* between the lusory goals of the higher and lower-level games. Winning an individual match might be valued in itself, but it also always *necessarily* contributes to winning a tournament. Winning a tournament may be a goal in itself as well, but winning that tournament also necessarily contributes to winning the year-end rankings, and so on. By contrast, in the Triple Triad metagame, winning may or may not contribute to winning *Final Fantasy VIII*: victory in *Final Fantasy VIII* is not *constituted by* victory in Triple Triad in quite the same way. In other words, metagames involve lusory goals that are at least in principle in tension with one another.

7. Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to lay out the terrain of metagames in a clear way that might be of use to philosophers of sport and games. I started by distinguishing between four different senses of the term 'metagame':

(1) Social metagames, which consist in the social activities of communities that surround the playing of a particular game. This sense of the term is probably of most interest to sociologists.
(2) Strategic metagames, which involve 'higher-level' strategising about games. Strategic metagames are of most interest to players, viewers and game analysts.
(3) Intertextual metagames, which are games that draw on or make reference to other games. In treating games as text, this kind of metagame is of most interest to cultural studies/media studies scholars.
(4) Ludic metagames, which are games played *on top of* existing games. It's this sense of metagame that I think is of most interest to philosophers of sport and games.

Taking up the idea of ludic metagames further, in order to define such games clearly, I contrasted ludic metagames with other activities that are in certain respects similar and that might be mistaken for them.

Alternative Games: When the constitutive rules of a game are changed for all players —whether this is because global change is necessary to changing the rules at all, as in the case of definitional rules or action rules that are more permissive than the original rules; or because all players as a matter of fact accept more restrictive action rules—then we are dealing with an 'alternative game'. Alternative games are not metagames in any sense; they are merely a new, different game that exists either subsequent to the original one or alongside it (think Rugby Union vs. Rugby League).

Countergames: When players adopt a new goal, but that goal entails constitutive rules that directly conflict with the constitutive rules of the base game, we have a countergame.

Because the constitutive rules of countergames and the base game are mutually exclusive, countergames cannot be played simultaneously with the base game: we have to choose to play one or the other at any given time.

Action-Restricted Games: If a subset of players accept both the constitutive rules of the base game *and* the goal of the base game, but add additional restrictions to the action rules of a game; and if they consider those restrictions as a matter of playing the base game with a supplementary challenge (rather than playing a separate game *in addition to* the base game, a game with its own, independent goal), then such players are playing an action-restricted game.

Subgames: When a game is played within a base game, but the goals of that game are valued instrumentally, as a way of advancing towards the goal of the base game, we have a subgame. For instance, penalty shootouts in soccer have their own subset of rules. However, typically winning a penalty shootout is valued not as an end in itself, but rather because winning the penalty shootout means winning the base game of soccer. The only difference between subgames and metagames, however, is whether the players adopt a metalusory attitude. For instance, if soccer players happened to value the goals of a penalty shootout independently of the goal of soccer, then we could plausibly describe that penalty shootout as a metagame.

Nested Games: Like subgames in that they are instrumentally valued for winning the base game, but at the same time like metagames in that the lower-level games are simultaneously valued in their own right. Nested games are distinct from metagames in that the part-whole relation between the games at different levels makes winning at one level a necessary, constitutive part of winning at another: there is no tension between the lusory goals of each game.

Ludic Metagames: Finally, if players accept the constitutive rules of a game, but add their own *goal* to the game; and if they consider that goal as independent from the goal of the base game (even if the goals overlap in content), then they are playing a metagame. In other words, a metagame can be defined as a) A game that is played simultaneously to another game (the base game); b) that accepts the constitutive rules of that base game; c) while adding an additional goal (which can include constitutive rules unique to that goal, though never rules that contradict the rules of the base game); d) where that additional goal is valued independently to the goal of the base game and is in principle in tension with it.

Notes

1. Nothing about my typology of four kinds of metagame rules out other senses of the term not covered here.
2. I don't intend to defend a particular account of what a game is in this paper; I more or less just take Bernard Suits' definition (Suits 2005, 54–55) as a given.
3. By 'goal' here I mean a 'lusory' rather than 'prelusory' goal (Suits 2005, 38–39). Suits' 'prelusory goal' refers to a non-game state of affairs that the players are trying to achieve, and which can

therefore be described independently of the game itself. By contrast, 'lusory' goals are the conditions that determine whether the game has been won in accordance with the constitutive rules (and especially what I later call 'definitional rules') that give rise to that goal within the context of the game. So, for instance, the prelusory goal of golf is to get the ball in the hole (an objective definition). But the lusory goal would be something like 'get the ball in the hole using the fewest number of strokes (define "stroke"); starting from the tee (define "tee"); according to the rules of golf'. This sense of 'goal', then, draws on concepts and definitions from within the game itself, which prelusory goals do not.

4. It doesn't have to be two-player: we could imagine a version of Hotelier in which a single player sets themselves the goal of building *x*< number of hotels. This would also be a metagame.
5. Of course, there are *laws* about what I can and cannot do, but these merely *govern* the activity of driving to work, rather than *constitute* it.
6. While this is generally true, I think it runs into trouble with purely professional games of pure chance, where I argue that players can adopt an instrumental attitude while still being said to play the game. See Hemmingsen (2020).
7. I mostly discuss the creation of action-restricted rules as an 'additional challenge'. However, I don't want to build into the definition of action-restricted rules any *particular* motivation for creating additional action rules. As Joseph Kupfer points out, a player may be motivated not merely by challenge, but by the desire to play more beautifully, creatively, ethically, and so on (Kupfer 1975). Hence, though I use the word 'challenge', this should be taken in a much broader sense, and as consistent with any possible motivation or purpose a player might have.

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