Squid games and the lusory attitude

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1. Introduction

On Bernard Suits's celebrated analysis, to play a game is to engage in a 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2005: 55). This is the condensed version. Spelt out in full detail, to play a game is to:

(1) 'attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs' (= attempt) (*prelusory goal*);
(2) 'using only means permitted by the rules where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means' (= unnecessary obstacles) (*constitutive rules*);
(3) 'and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity' (= voluntariness) (*lusory attitude*). (Suits 2005: 54–55)

For example, when you play golf you attempt to get a ball into a hole using only the rule-permitted inefficient means of hitting it with a club, voluntarily accepting these rules for the reason that this makes it possible to engage in this activity.

Now consider Netflix's hit show *Squid Game*. The 456 participants, all in deep debt, are half-kidnapped, placed in a facility on a remote island and made to play six different Korean children's games with the idea that the winner takes home a gigantic sum of money. The first game is *Red Light / Green Light*, the goal of which is to pass an end line and the rules of which permit players to move towards the end line if a huge doll shouts out 'green light' and require them to stay immobile if the doll shouts 'red light'. If anyone fails to stay immobile at 'red light' then they lose. It becomes clear to the players as soon as the game starts that if someone loses, they are shot on the spot. The further games follow the same pattern: loss equals death.

It is intuitive that most of the participants of *Squid Game* do play these 'squid games', but also that they do not do so *voluntarily*, but are *forced* to play.[1] If this is correct, then Suits's analysis needs to be revised. More generally, if we think that one can be *forced* to play a game, then it cannot be essential to playing a game that one does so voluntarily in the sense that one accepts its rules for the reason that this makes playing it possible.

1 If you have not seen the show, just consider a hypothetical example where you are lured to play a game like chess or Monopoly on the promise of a big prize, but then discover, once the game starts, that loss equals death. What is important about the example is that the activity you engage in is an actual game. That is why other similar pop culture examples like the fights to the death in *Battle Royale* or *Hunger Games* or the ordeals in *Saw* do not work as well.

Analysis Vol. 82 | Number 4 | October 2022 | 638–646 https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anac025
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In this paper, I will argue that this is indeed correct, that we should rethink Suits's third condition and that this leads to an overall better view. I will argue that to play a game one does not have to do so voluntarily or have the lusory attitude oneself. Even though in typical cases we do play games voluntarily, this is not necessary in order to play them. What is necessary for the players to play is that *someone* has to put the rules in force for them for the reason that it makes playing the game possible. Usually, it is the players themselves who do this by voluntarily accepting the rules. However, it is entirely possible that a Frontman puts the rules in force for the players on pain of punishment or death.[2]

I will proceed as follows. In §2, I will give a Suitsian account of games that distinguishes them from other rule-constituted activities, arguing that forced games such as squid games require us to revise the third condition, and show how to do it. In §3, I will illustrate the virtues of the revised analysis by looking at Hurka's recent counterexamples to Suits's view and show how it helps us to defuse them.

2. *Games and playing them*

What are games? We distinguish between games themselves (chess) and individual token games (Fischer–Spassky match, 1972, game 6). Games themselves can be thought of in at least two related ways. Analogously to Lewis's view of languages or possible languages as sets of expressions with their meanings, we could think of games as sets of actions, pieces etc. together with their significance in the game plus the goals to be achieved (Lewis 1975). Let us call these sorts of abstract entities Lewisian games. It is standard to think that the significance of actions in the game are settled by the constitutive rules that govern them. Therefore we can think of Lewisian games as sets of constitutive rules together with their goals (Ridge 2021: 8825).[3]

What makes Lewisian games different from other sets of similar constitutive rules? Suppose you thought that languages are also constituted by rules and thus that Lewisian languages are also sets of constitutive rules (Alston 2000, Reiland forthcoming). For example, here is a possible rule of English (where '*s*' ranges over speakers):

(Ouch!) $\forall s$(*s* may use 'Ouch!' iff *s* is in pain) (Kaplan MS)

What makes Lewisian games different from Lewisian languages? On Suits's view, it is the fact that the rules of games taken together specify goals or ends

2 The Frontman is the title of the game director in *Squid Game*, overseeing all aspects of how the facility is run and games are played.

3 If, like me, you prefer to use 'rule' in such a way that nothing counts as one unless it is in force then we might think of Lewisian games as sets of *rule-contents*, contents of the right sort, which become actual rules once they are put in force.

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and permit only inefficient means for achieving them. Nothing similar is true of languages since their rules neither specify goals/ends to be achieved nor permit only inefficient means. The above rule of language just links the uses of an expression with being in a particular mental state.

Now, Lewisian games and languages are abstract, ahistorical entities that cannot change over time. Lewisian chess-1 without *en passant* is a different game from Lewisian chess-2 with *en passant*. Lewisian English-1 where 'meat' means the same as 'solid food' is different from Lewisian English-2 where 'meat' means the same as 'animal flesh eaten as food'. However, intuitively the things we ordinarily talk about by using 'chess' and 'English' do not cease to exist when a rule is added or changed or an expression changes its meaning. It is therefore more natural to think that these terms pick out *social practices* that evolve over time (Williamson 1996: 490, Ridge 2021: 8831). But the Lewisian games/languages and games/languages qua social practices are plausibly related. The social practice of chess is just the practice of *playing* a series of related Lewisian chesses, and the social practice of English is a practice of *speaking* a series of related Lewisian Englishes.

What is it to *play* a game? The received wisdom handed down by Searle is that, for any activity constituted by rules, for you to engage in that activity you have to *follow* or *try to follow* the rules (Searle 1969: 33–37). This entails that you cannot play a game while intentionally breaking its rules. Echoing a host of other dissenting voices, I have recently argued at length that this is implausible: playing, speaking and asserting are all entirely compatible with intentional breakings such as intentional fouls in basketball, and with cheating such as lying (Reiland 2020: 144–47; see also Williamson 1996, Glüer and Pagin 1999, Kreider 2011, García-Carpintero 2022). Instead, for you to engage in any rule-constituted activity, the rules have to be in force for you: they must apply to you or govern your activity. Suits essentially agrees, building into his definition the idea that for you to engage in a rule-constituted activity the rules have to be in force for you, by adding the part about the *lusory attitude*: the players have to *accept* the rules just because it makes the activity possible.[4] This is so because accepting a rule is one way in which the rule can come to be in force for you.[5] However, and this is the important point, Suits goes beyond the basic idea that to perform the rule-constituted activity the rules have to be in force for you by adding the idea that one has to *voluntarily* put them into force for oneself by accepting them.

4 However, Suits seemed to also agree with Searle in thinking that the constitutive rules of games cannot be broken while continuing to play (Suits 2005: 51–52). For criticism see Reiland 2020: 147.

5 Acceptance can perhaps be understood in terms of *commitment*: to accept a rule is to commit to following it, which is compatible with breaking it (Kreider 2011: 61, Reiland 2020: 150). In the case of playing with others, this is plausibly a matter of *publicly* made, communicated commitments analogous to promises (Ridge 2019: 78, Reiland 2020: 150).

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This addition is what the counterexample from squid games targets. Consider again *Red Light / Green Light*. I said in the beginning that it is intuitive that the participants play this game but do not do so voluntarily. It is true that, in the show, before the games start, the players give their consent to play, though at the time they are uninformed of what games they will be playing or of the fact that loss equals death. It is also true that they are given the option, in between games, of ending the whole series of games when the majority agrees. But once they have consented to taking part in the games in general, they are *forced* to play any game that they are given, that is, they have no option other than to take part in it, on pain of death. And once a particular game is started, they have no way of opting out. Thus, once they are playing a particular game like *Red Light / Green Light*, they do not voluntarily accept its rules just because it makes it possible to play it. Rather, they accept them on pain of death.

Could one object by saying that the participants are, in some sense, part of the game while nevertheless not playing it? Suits himself drew two distinctions that are relevant here. The first is between playing and playing a game (Suits 2005: 129–30). Amateur game-players are at play when playing a game, while professionals are working when they play a game. It is clear that the participants in squid games are not at play. But that does not mean they cannot not be playing the games. Second, Suits distinguished between participating in the institution of the game and playing the game. For example, he called players who do not aim to win the game *triflers* and argued that they are merely participating in the institution of the game, not genuinely playing (Suits 2005: 53–54). But this does not support the objection either since most participants in the squid games are aiming to win and thereby to survive. What matters for us here is that it is possible to be forced to play a game and neither of the above distinctions undermines this.[6]

So I think we should revise the analysis. All that is required to accommodate forced games is to drop Suits's addition of voluntariness. For the players of squid games to play, it is enough that the rules are put in force for them by the Frontman, as long as *he* has the 'lusory attitude', that is, if he puts the rules in force to make playing the game possible.[7]

6 A referee helpfully points out that some participants in the squid games are not playing the game either: for example, and with apologies to those who have not seen the show, Ji-yeong and Ali in the marble episode, and, I would add, Kim Joo-ry in the hopscotch episode. Ji-yeong and Kim Joo-ry are sacrificing themselves either for someone else or for the greater good, while Ali is trying to escape the game. For further discussion of the ways in which people can be part of the game while not playing it see Wolf-Root 2020.

7 Note that it makes sense to stop calling the relevant attitude a '*lusory*' one since it is simply the general condition for performing any rule-constituted activity and is not distinctive to games.

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To sum up, let us look again at Suits's definition. We can now see that the first two conditions are what really pertain to the nature of games:

(1) 'attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs' (*prelusory goal*);
(2) 'using only means permitted by the rules where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means' (*game rules*).

These conditions capture the way in which games are rule-constituted activities, but also how they are different from other such activities.[8] However, Suits's third condition pertains to playing. In the light of the foregoing discussion and the possibility of forced play, we should revise it by dropping any mention of voluntariness or the players themselves accepting the rules:

(3) 'and where the rules are *put in force* by someone just because they make possible such activity' (*governance*).

This analysis makes clear both how games are related and how they differ from other rule-constituted things like, perhaps, languages. Games and languages are both constituted by rules. But games are special in specifying prelusory goals and restricting the means of achieving them. Yet in both cases to engage in a rule-constituted activity is just to perform the relevant actions while the rules are in force for one, where the rules are put in force by *someone* just because they make the activity possible.[9] If you play voluntarily, you put the rules in force for yourself to play. However, if you are forced to play, someone else puts the rules in force for you so that you can play.[10]

8 One might add that an essential part of our ordinary notion of a game, as emphasized by Dummett, is that there is winning or losing (and, sometimes, drawing) (1959: 142–43). Davidson later argued that this is one of the ways in which language differs from a game because in that case there is nothing analogous to winning (1984: 5–6). A referee presented a case where a gunman forces you to clean a car with a toothbrush, thereby specifying a prelusory goal (clean car), and setting rules prohibiting efficient means (allowing only a toothbrush), suggesting that this is intuitively not an instance of playing a forced game. I agree, but I think that this is because, as described, there is no winning or losing. However, if we change the case so that two people are cleaning and whoever finishes first gets to survive, it does become a forced game. One could easily imagine people playing this game unforced, for prizes.

9 In the case of languages, the rules are plausibly 'put in force' by the whole linguistic community via something like collective acceptance over time.

10 Dropping voluntariness also helps to accommodate the fact that players can play games without having full grasp of the rules. Plausibly, it is a condition on putting a rule in force that one has at least some grip on what it says. If playing is voluntary and requires putting the rules of the game in force for oneself it follows that players who lack a grasp of them cannot play it. This might be considered counterintuitive both in the abstract and because many actual games have highly complicated rules that nobody but the officials grasp (Kreider 2011: 59–61). Our revised view accommodates this nicely since the officials can make it the case that the rules are in force for the players, and it is only they who have to have a full grip on what the rules say (for more discussion on epistemic conditions on playing, see Schwengerer 2019).

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3. *Hurka's counterexamples: driving, choosing a portrait and exams*

Hurka has recently suggested that Suits's lusory attitude of accepting the rules just because they make the rule-constituted activity possible admits of at least three different readings, depending on what the players' motivation is for doing so:

(1) Weakest: the motivation is to accept them just to engage in that activity;
(2) Middle: the motivation is to accept them just to engage in that activity *for its own sake*;
(3) Strongest: the motivation is to accept them just to engage in that activity *for its own sake for the reason that the rules generate a challenge you want to meet*. (Hurka 2019: 20)

Hurka suggests that perhaps amateurs satisfy the Middle and the Strongest condition, but pure professional players, those who play for money, do not. Therefore, the Weakest construal is best. I agree and think it is clear that this is the one Suits had in mind.

However, Hurka also thinks that it opens Suits's view up to some counterexamples to the effect that the definition will include things that are intuitively not games. He considers three cases. Even though the first two are not related to our discussion of squid games, it will be instructive to go through them nevertheless, before getting to the final and most interesting one.

Here is Hurka's first case:

> *Driving*: You're driving in a 60 km/hour zone, and though you could get home more quickly and just as safely by driving 70, you stick to the limit because you don't want to get a speeding ticket. You accept a rule forbidding more efficient means, and though you do so only so you won't get caught speeding, the pure professional golfer obeys the rules of golf only so he won't get caught cheating. If he's playing a game, why aren't you? (Hurka 2019: 21)

I think this objection misses its mark. Traffic rules are in force for drivers independently of their own acceptance (compare Alston 2000: 62). Hurka says that you accept the rule to avoid getting a speeding ticket, but this is beside the point. What matters is how the rule comes to be in force and for which reasons, and it is clear that your acceptance does not figure into this. It is the relevant traffic authority that puts the rule in force. And they do so to make driving safer, not to make possible a new, rule-constituted activity. So *Driving* does not satisfy any of the conditions for playing a game. In contrast, even the pure professional accepts the golf rules to make it possible to play golf.[11]

11 Hurka's claim that the pure professional golfer accepts the rules so that they will not get caught cheating is a bit hard to make sense of. You can accept the rules of golf in order to play golf and still cheat. In fact, like other intentional breakings, cheating presupposes that the rules are in force for you. Hurka might be mistakenly construing acceptance in terms of trying to follow the rule. Then both his *Driving* counterexample and his claim about professional

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Here is Hurka's second case:

> *Portrait*: In *The Merchant of Venice* the suitors for Portia's hand must choose the casket containing her portrait from among a gold, a silver, and a lead one. They accept a rule that forbids them to open the caskets first, and do so because they want to engage in the mandated activity of choosing a casket blindly. Yet surely they aren't playing a game. (Hurka 2019: 21)

Why not? This fits the analysis and seems like a very simple game played to decide the outcome. How is choosing a portrait without looking any different from playing *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, which is also mostly done to decide outcomes?

The third case is most interesting, and here is where our discussion of squid games helps:

> *Exams*: I once asked Suits whether writing an exam, for example a university physics exam, is a game. He said it is, and it seems to fit his analysis. You have the goal of giving correct answers to the exam questions, and accept rules forbidding more efficient ways of doing so such as looking the answers up in a book. But, intuitively, exam-writing doesn't belong in the same category as golf and chess. (Hurka 2019: 21)

A closed-book exam fits Suits's analysis but intuitively is unlike golf and chess. This is because, I submit, it is a *necessarily* forced game. The teacher arranges the exam by specifying 'answering the questions' as the goal and putting in force game-like rules permitting only inefficient means (ruling out asking others, open books etc.). And, like the Frontman, the teacher puts the rules in force precisely to make the closed-book exam possible. The students take part because they want to pass the course. And once they participate in the exam they are not accepting the rules because this makes it possible to take the exam, they accept them on pain of getting caught and receiving a failing grade, being expelled etc.

In other words, closed-book exams fit Suits's analysis and are games. But Hurka is right that they are intuitively unlike *paradigmatic* games such as chess and golf. This is because they are *necessarily* forced games in the sense that they would not be exams if it was not the teacher who put the rules in force but the exam-takers themselves. In contrast, paradigmatic games can all be played, and mostly are played, voluntarily. This is why, I think, there is intuitive resistance to thinking of exams as games. But suppose we consider cases where the 'necessarily forced' part is removed. For example, consider taking a practice test (such as a GRE test) where you put the rules in force for yourself with the aim of getting better. This seems quite similar to playing practice

golfers would make more sense. But the discussion of the previous section should have made clear that we should not do this since it makes playing incompatible with intentional fouls and cheating.

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matches of chess or golf with the aim of getting better. And consider taking a practice GRE test purely for the fun of it. It is not clear whether this is any different from doing crossword or sudoku puzzles for fun.

Suits saw correctly that exams fit his analysis and are games. What he failed to see is that they defeat his analysis in terms of the players having to voluntarily accept the rules to engage in that activity. It is true that someone has to put the rules in force for the players for the reason that it makes possible the rule-constituted activity. But this does not have to be the players themselves; it can be the Frontman or the teacher.[12]

Funding

This work was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) (grant number M 3373-G).

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12 I thank Ben Lennertz, Eliot Michaelson and two anonymous referees for comments and discussion.

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