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WHY JEOPARDY'S BEING A GOOD GAME SHOW MAKES IT GOOD AS A GAME

BRENDAN SHEA, PHD

Jeopardy! occupies a special place among television game shows. Part of the reason for this undoubtedly has to do with simple longevity—with short interruptions, it has been on television since 1964—but this is hardly the only factor. A far more important difference between *Jeopardy!* and many other popular game shows involves their differing nature as *games*, and what it takes to play and win these games. Winning consistently at *Jeopardy!*, unlike winning on other shows, requires considerable skill, and many of us admire those who demonstrate this skill. Ken Jennings, for example, was invited on late night talk shows and given book deals in recognition of his long winning streak, and a computer (Watson) beating Jennings several years later was widely recognized as an indicator of how far artificial intelligence had progressed. It is hard to imagine similar reactions to a successful contestant (whether computer or human) on the *Wheel of Fortune* or *Let's Make a Deal*.

Of course, *Jeopardy!* isn't the only game show that requires skill. Some of the dozens of quiz shows that have been on TV over the past four decades have, no doubt, been "tougher" to win than *Jeopardy!*, at least in terms of having more difficult questions or requiring players to obey more stringent rules. However, the skills required in *Jeopardy!*, unlike the skills required for many of these quiz shows, extend beyond mere knowledge of trivia. Successful *Jeopardy!* players must be good at such things as (1) using their knowledge of language to take advantage of the puns and humor that characterize *Jeopardy!* questions, (2) basing their wagers on good estimates of how likely their guesses are to be correct, and (3) predicting how their opponents will play.

In this essay, I'd like to suggest that part of what makes *Jeopardy!* so distinctive is that it, unlike so many other TV game shows, is a genuinely good *game.* This presents a bit of a philosophical puzzle, however, as it can be difficult to pin down what exactly a *game* is. This difficulty has led some famous philosophers, including sometimes *Jeopardy!* category Ludwig Wittgenstein, to argue that it is actually impossible to provide a definition of *game*

that isn't either too broad or too restrictive.[1] Even more difficult, for us fans of good games, is to explain why it is that *Jeopardy!*'s being a good game even matters—after all, if you enjoy watching *Wheel of Fortune* and I enjoy watching *Jeopardy!*, it might seem that we merely have a difference of opinion on what counts as a good game, and that there is no fact of matter about who is right.

Many fans of *Jeopardy!* will no doubt have their favorite arguments at the ready ("You learn things watching the show!"), but the philosophical issues at stake—what does it mean to say that something is a *game,* what makes a game *good*, and why does that *matter?*—are deep ones worth considering in more detail.

How To Win At *Jeopardy!*

Becoming a *Jeopardy!* contestant (never mind a *Jeopardy!* winner) can be a laborious process. Potential candidates must take qualifying exams and screen tests, and then take time off work or school to fly out to Los Angeles if they are selected. Some of the most dedicated candidates might spend hundreds of hours on such tasks, including any studying they might decide to undertake. So, if all this effort is required, why do players do it? One reason might be for the hope of some reward, such as money, fame, or the self-confidence that comes with accomplishing something difficult. For many players, however, including the vast majority of us who will only ever play the video game or board game, it seems plausible that part of the reason for playing is for the sheer joy of it. This is typical of games, which are the sorts of activities people usually engage in for the sake of the activity itself, as opposed to activities like work that are done for some external purpose.

While individual *Jeopardy!* players might have a wide variety of personal reasons for competing, there is a sense in which all players have the *same* goals once the contest has started—they want to accumulate the available money and win the game. Again, this is typical of games, which are by their very nature a goal-directed activity.

With this in mind, a person might reasonably ask: "What is the goal of *Jeopardy!*, when we leave aside consideration of individual players, and think about it simply as a game?" This sort of question might be answered in at least two different ways:

1. The goal is to have the most money at the end of show.

2. The goal is to win the game.

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[1] In *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell Publishing, 2001) Wittgenstein claims that while all games have a sort of "family resemblance" to one another, it isn't possible to explicitly define what it is that all games have in common.

While these goals might sound like two ways of describing the same thing, there are important differences between them that will prove crucial to our understanding of games.

The first goal, which we'll call the *prelusory goal*, is the end result that players must produce if they are to win, but is itself not the same thing as "winning the game." One might reach the prelusory goal by means fair (being knowledgeable and making wise wagers) or foul (blackmailing Alex for the answers [which, of course, take the form of questions] ahead of time). In the former case, the player has also achieved the second goal, which consists in winning the game. In the latter case, however, it does not seem that the player has done this. In order to truly "win" a game, one must not only achieve the prelusory goal, but also do so in the right manner—by following rules. It wouldn't do, for instance, to bribe the score keeper to "accidentally" add $10,000 to your score before Final *Jeopardy!* (and then hope that no one notices).

Every game has a prelusory goal. For example, in Uno, one's prelusory goal is to get rid of all the cards, while in golf the prelusory goal is to get a small white ball in a hole. As these examples suggest, achieving the prelusory goal might well require the use of equipment that is normally used for games (such as Uno cards or golf clubs), or the exploitation of institutions that were originally designed with games in mind (such as TV shows on which players can win money). However, the prelusory goal exists independently of the game as such, and such goals can always (in principle, at least) be achieved without ever playing the game. For a concrete example of how this might be possible in a game like *Jeopardy!*, consider the contestants on the rigged quiz shows of the 1950s (made famous again by the movie *Quiz Show*), who apparently had goals very similar to the prelusory goals pursued by *Jeopardy!* contestants. They achieved these goals, however, not by playing a game but by following a script. *Jeopardy!* contestants who cheat are, in effect, doing something similar—they are achieving the prelusory goal of *Jeopardy!* without ever really playing the game.

The second goal, which we'll call the *lusory goal*, is achieved when a contestant reaches the prelusory goal of *Jeopardy!* by following the rules. In *Jeopardy!*, the contestant who "wins fair and square" has achieved the lusory goal. The lusory goal is both *complex,* in that it requires achieving the prelusory goal, and game-dependent, in that it cannot be achieved without playing the game of *Jeopardy!.* Just as every game has a prelusory goal, each game will also have a lusory goal that consists of achieving the prelusory goal in the right way.

Prelusory and lusory goals are not unique to *Jeopardy!*. In fact, leaving aside metaphorical uses of the word *game,* such as "the game of life" or "language games," these two distinct sorts of goals plausibly exist for every game. In his book *The Grasshopper*, Bernard Suits convincingly argues that nearly every game has a prelusory and lusory goal, and these two goals feature prominently in the definition of *game* he proposes (a definition we'll adopt

here as well).[2] Suits recognizes that a game is more than what it takes to win it, however. In addition to goals, every game must also have rules, and rules of a very particular type.

Rules, Rules, and More Rules

The rules in *Jeopardy!*, just like rules in other games, come in several varieties. The first sort of rules prohibit players from pursuing the prelusory goal—the goal of having the most money at the end of the Final Jeopardy! round—in certain sorts of ways. So, for example, these rules stipulate that players aren't allowed to look up answers on their mobile phones, call their high school history teachers for advice, or supplement their total score by handing the scorekeeper some extra money they brought to the studio in their pockets.

Following Suits, we'll call the first sort of rules *constitutive rules*, since these rules constitute, or make up, a game. In *Jeopardy!*, some of the more easily recognizable constitutive rules include

1. all answers must be phrased in the form of a question,
2. players can't ring in before Alex has finished reading the question, and
3. players must determine their wager for Final Jeopardy! before they see the question (which, again, is in the form of an answer).

These aren't the only constitutive rules of *Jeopardy!*, of course, and many of the constitutive rules deal with issues that rarely arise during a normal game. So, for example, the constitutive rules forbid players from using any kind of external aid, whether this be computer or human. Presumably, there are also general rules of conduct that forbid players from doing things like throwing their shoes at opponents in attempts to distract them.

In general, violations of constitutive rules will always generate some sort of penalty. So, for example, if a contestant forgets to phrase his answer in the form of a question during Double Jeopardy! or Final Jeopardy!, the answer will count as incorrect. By contrast, if a contestant on the show were found to have an earpiece through which her aunt was feeding her answers, she would (presumably) forfeit the game.

By now, you probably have a pretty good sense of what counts as a constitutive rule of *Jeopardy!*. However, we still haven't given a definition of "constitutive rule," which is what we really need to do (as you read this book, you'll no doubt notice that philosophers love to provide definitions). We'll say that a *constitutive rule* is a rule that prohibits the players of a

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[2] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (University of Toronto Press, 1978). Suits also discusses games in "What is a Game?" *Philosophy of Science* 34, no. 2 (1967): 148-156, and "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport" *Journal of Philosophy of Sport* 15, no. 1 (1988): 1-9.

game from using certain means to achieve the prelusory goal, and thereby makes achieving the prelusory goal more challenging than otherwise would be the case. In other words, the constitutive rules make the players pursue the prelusory goal using means that are *inefficient.* Without the sorts of prohibitions introduced by constitutive rules, games such as *Jeopardy!* couldn't exist, since there would be no such thing as the lusory goal of winning by following the rules.

Constitutive rules aren't the only rules relevant to understanding *Jeopardy!*. A second sort of rules, which might be called *rules of thumb,* are also involved. Some sample rules of thumb (though not necessarily good ones) might be

1. a contestant who has less than $0 during the final moments of the Double *Jeopardy!* round should attempt to ring in aggressively,

2. the first-place contestant in Final Jeopardy! should never wager more than needed to win, and

3. players should always answer "Who is Marten van Buren?" for any question about a U.S. president that stumps them.

As these examples should make clear, rules of thumb, unlike constitutive rules, aren't really essential to understanding the nature of *Jeopardy!* as a game. Rather, rules of thumb relate to the difference between good *Jeopardy!* players (who use well-founded rules of thumb) and bad ones (the ones who guess "Marten van Buren" more than they perhaps should). The question of what makes a good *Jeopardy!* player, while certainly an interesting one, isn't as fundamental as the ones we'll be trying to answer. It concerns the *way* we ought to play games (if we want to win) rather than *what* games are and *why* we bother playing them at all.

There is another sort of rules that sometimes become relevant to game playing—the moral and legal rules that govern our conduct in general. These rules prohibit, among other things, attempting to win *Jeopardy!* by murder, blackmail, or theft. While I haven't checked, my guess is that breaking one of these rules probably violates the regulations agreed to by potential contestants on *Jeopardy!*. If this is true, this is a happy coincidence, since there are certainly some games (from backroom poker to illegal street fights) where following the constitutive rules of the game is no guarantee that one is following other, more important, rules.

Please Answer in the Form of a Question

All of this talk about constitutive rules might seem pretty obvious—after all, you can't have a game without rules, right? But there is a deeper point here as well. The constitutive rules

governing games are, in certain very important ways, completely unlike the rules that govern the rest of our lives, such as the legal and moral prohibitions just mentioned.

Consider, for instance, the well-known *Jeopardy!* rule that requires players to answer in the form of a question. This rule, like every good constitutive rule, is designed to introduce an element of inefficiency and, thus, challenge. For the very same reasons that answering in the form of a question makes a good constitutive rule for a game, it would make a terrible rule for life in general. It would certainly make ordering at restaurants a challenge ("What is the bacon double cheeseburger?"), and cause absolute havoc when used to respond to marriage proposals ("What is `yes'?"), to name just a couple examples. Where a little forced inefficiency can make the pursuit of the prelusory goals of games all the more interesting and worthwhile, the same can hardly be said of life goals in general. For goals like obtaining nourishment and finding love, people tend (with good reason!) to favor the means that allows them to most efficiently achieve their goals.

This contrast highlights what is perhaps the deepest difference between the constitutive rules of games and the moral and legal rules governing our conduct in general—namely, the reason that we obey them. While there is no generally accepted account of why we ought to follow moral and legal rules, one can imagine any number of plausible answers: "Because people won't associate with me if I don't", "Because I don't want to go to jail", "Because moral people tend to be happier", "Because it is the right thing to do". These sorts of answers are not available for the constitutive rules of games, however. In games like *Jeopardy!*, the reason that players obey the constitutive rules is that (1) you can't play *Jeopardy!* without obeying the constitutive rules and (2) the players want to play *Jeopardy!*. The reason we follow constitutive rules is because we want to play the games they make possible, and not for any higher-minded reason.

With this reason for following constitutive rules in mind, we're finally ready to offer a definition of what a *game* is and get on with the business of explaining why *Jeopardy!* is a good game. A *game* is an activity that has each of the following:

1. A prelusory goal, which is the game-independent result that the participants aim to accomplish.

2. One or more constitutive rules limiting the means to pursue this goal.

3. Participants who follow the constitutive rules for the reason that they want to participate in the activity. We'll call this attitude the *lusory attitude.*

By these criteria, *Jeopardy!* is clearly a game, whereas, say, the typical commute to work is not. While commuting to work certainly has a goal (getting there), it isn't the sort of activity that has constitutive rules introducing deliberate inefficiencies (most of us don't drive our

cars an extra lap around the block just to add time), and the average commuter doesn't have the requisite attitude (the reason she is traversing the distance to work isn't for the sake of covering the distance).

We can, of course, imagine a person who turned the daily commute into a game, for example, by deciding that she would aim to take at least one new street every day on her way to work. This adoption of a new constitutive rule, combined with the shift in attitude, might signal that her commute was no longer just about getting to work, but was also being done for its own sake. However, while this activity might qualify as a game, it hardly seems like the sort of game, a la *Jeopardy!*, that would be worth playing more than once or twice. This observation brings us to our next point—not all games are created equal.

Playing a Good Game

So far, we've explored what it means to claim that *Jeopardy!* is a game, and in doing so have also provided an account of what games are in general. Merely showing that *Jeopardy!* is a game doesn't do much for us, though, unless we can draw a meaningful distinction between good games and bad games and explain why it is that good games matter.

Many of the characteristics that make *Jeopardy!* a better game than other television game shows probably seem self-evident (or at least, they probably seem self-evident to fans of *Jeopardy!*). I talked a little about these characteristics earlier: *Jeopardy!* is challenging, success involves skill as opposed to pure luck, and the skills *Jeopardy!* requires (like general purpose knowledge, a good betting strategy, and the ability to predict what your opponents will do) are good life skills. This suggests that a large part of what separates good games from not-so-good games is what they require of those who play. Playing a good game well—whether it be *Jeopardy!*, chess, or basketball—requires that we do more than simply show up and hope for the best. We have to dig down, try hard, and use the skills we've developed to meet the challenges presented by the game.

Just as when we were searching for the definition of a *game*, though, we'll have to be careful if we want to figure out the difference between good games and games. The comparison between *Jeopardy!* and game shows like *Wheel of Fortune* suggests that part of the difference has to do with difficulty—a good game should be *difficult*, in the sense that winning the game requires the players to challenge themselves in significant ways. However, it also won't do to simply say that the best games are the *most* difficult ones. After all, one could imagine a revised version of *Jeopardy!* in which a contestant won only if she got every question correct, with the game otherwise being declared a draw and none of the players being invited to come back to play again the next day. One could devise an infinite number of progressively sillier constitutive rules along these lines—one could require that players ring in within 0.1 second of hearing the clue read, that they express their answers

in questions that were exactly 140 characters in length, or that they juggle a set of steak knives throughout the *Jeopardy!* contest.

This suggests that a good game must have a set of constitutive rules that strike a successful balance between (1) making reaching the prelusory goal too easy, where winning requires little or no effort, and (2) making reaching the prelusory goal so insanely difficult that players may as well not bother trying. Games whose rules are either too loose or too strict will create a situation where players don't have any motivation to exert their best effort in winning the game. In good games, unlike in bad games, winning is not merely a matter of luck.[3]

Over the years, *Jeopardy!* has undergone a number of revisions to its rules that reflect the importance of maintaining this balance. So, for example, when *Jeopardy!* first aired, players were allowed to buzz in at any time they so desired, even if the question was still being read. This rule risked creating a situation where speed with the buzzer was doing more to help players win than knowledge of *Jeopardy!* questions or wise betting strategy. Because it was (rightly) felt that *Jeopardy!* would be a better game if winning depended more on knowledge, the constitutive rules of *Jeopardy!* were revised to ensure that players could not buzz in before the question had been read (and, if they violated this rule by attempting to buzz in early, their buzzer would be "locked out" for a short time afterward).

WHAT GOOD GAMES ARE GOOD FOR

If everything I've said so far is accurate, then we're finally in a place to claim with confidence that *Jeopardy!* is a good game. First of all, it is a game with a prelusory goal (getting the most money), constitutive rules (such as answering in the form of question), and participants who are in it for the right reasons (because they want to play *Jeopardy!*). Second, it is a *good* game—a game in which the constitutive rules strike a successful balance between making winning too difficult and too easy. We still haven't addressed the really important question, though: why does the fact that *Jeopardy!* is a good game matter, anyway?

One straightforward answer to this question might simply note that, since good games challenge players to show determination, dedication, and skill, they are for that very reason good things. All other things being equal, challenging activities such as *Jeopardy!* are simply more worthwhile than activities that require no effort whatsoever.

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[3] Even a casual fan knows winning *Jeopardy!* involves some luck, especially with respect to the questions that happen to be posed. Readers interested in the role of luck in games are encouraged to read Robert Simon, "Deserving to Be Lucky: Reflections on the Role of Luck and Desert in Sports." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34, no. 1 (May 2007): 13–25.

A second reason for suggesting that good games matter involves the *instrumental value* of the skills they help players develop. Many of the skills required by *Jeopardy!*—general knowledge, the ability to think quickly, and so on—have clear relevance for the lives of players outside of the game. This idea is a very intuitive one, and it is one that is often made by defenders of the value of games and sports. For example, Randolph Feezell, a philosopher who writes on the value of sports, has discussed at length the role that sports (which are simply a type of game) play in developing the sort of *character* that proves valuable for other life activities.[4]

While this purely instrumental function of good games is no doubt important, it would be a mistake to conclude that *Jeopardy!* is valuable for the sole reason that it is educational. After all, part of the reason that people enjoy watching and playing games is precisely to get away from the "real world" where every activity has to have some definite purpose. People play games because they are fun, and it would be surprising and disappointing if the value of *Jeopardy!* depended entirely on how much use you got out of the various facts that you managed to memorize when you were watching the show.

Two final reasons for good games mattering have been suggested by Thomas Hurka and John Tasioulas.[5] The first is that playing a good game well amounts to an objectively valuable accomplishment. This objective value is rooted in the fact that playing a good game well requires that players accomplish a wide variety of small tasks. So, for example, winning a game of *Jeopardy!* against skilled opponents requires that a player answer a large number of questions correctly, bet wisely, and stay focused enough to ring in at the right time. It is precisely because playing *Jeopardy!* well requires this varied combination of smaller accomplishments that it is more objectively valuable than, say, being the winning contestant on *Let's Make a Deal*, which demands far less of contestants.

Hurka and Tasioulas's second reason for thinking that games are valuable has to do with the lusory attitude possessed by game players. This attitude, you'll recall from earlier, involves the fact that game players (unlike participants in many other activities) must voluntarily adopt the (inefficient) rules of the game for the reason that *they want to play the game.* Hurka and Tasioulas argue that this attitude, which consists of wanting to a do a good thing for the very properties that make it good, is itself a good thing. Again, the fact that this sort of attitude is a good thing should make sense upon reflection. A deserving person's being happy, for instance, is a thing that most of us would recognize as a good thing. The idea here is that a second person's finding joy in that deserving person's happiness is also a good thing. So, if playing a challenging game like *Jeopardy!* is objectively

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[4] For an example of this view, see Randolph Feezell, *Sport, Play, and Ethical Reflection* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[5] Thomas Hurka and John Tasioulas, "Games and the Good." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl.* 80 (2006): 327–264.

good, then so is the fact that *Jeopardy!* players do so (at least in part) because they want to play a challenging game.

YOU CAN (AND SHOULD) PLAY ALONG AT HOME!

People watch *Jeopardy!* for many reasons—they enjoy the humor, they learn things, they just enjoy watching the competition, and so on. At least part of the fun for many of us, though, is the sense that we can "play along" with the contestants on TV by seeing how quickly we can think of the correct answers and considering how we would bet in various situations. On the account of games given in this chapter, this sort of active watching itself counts as a sort of game, with a prelusory goal (get the question correct before the contestant does!) and various constitutive rules (no looking at your cell phone!). Moreover, it is an activity whose rules we obey precisely because we find the activity worthwhile and we want to participate in it. While the challenges presented by these simpler, solitary games hardly rise to the level of flying out to California to compete on *Jeopardy!*, they are a reminder that almost all of us are game players at one point or another, and that our lives are enriched by good games like *Jeopardy!*[6]

[6]Thanks to everyone who read and gave comments on drafts of this article: Adam Bowen, Anne Rumery, Anne Shea, Eric Schaaf, Joe Swenson, Rachel Brito, and Uwe Plebuch.