This is a pre-print draft. The final version, with some minor changes, will appear in Hurka (ed.) *Suits and Games* (Oxford University Press)

# The Forms and Fluidity of Game Play

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Some theorists suppose that game-play is unified - that there is basically only one sort of game-play. I would like to argue, instead that there are multiple forms of game-play. What's more, I'll argue, once we see the multiple forms, we'll something even more important: that game-play is *fluid* - that the form of play is not fixed by the game, but chosen by the player. It is up to the player of a narrative computer game, like *Grand Theft Auto,* whether they engage in a game of imaginative role-playing, a competitive game of scoring more points, or some mixture of the two. The presumption of the uni-dimensionality of play masks a really interesting phenomenon: that the basic form of play is voluntary and highly variable, even inside one game.

To get there, I must first establish that game-play is *multiform.* There are at least two entirely different ways in which we can play a game. We can engage in *make-believe play*: the play of imagination, pretend, and role-play. We can also engage in *striving play*: the play of competition, challenge, and overcoming obstacles. I claim that these two forms of play are conceptually distinct and not reducible to one another. A professional chess player is engaged in pure striving play; children playing house are engaged in pure make-believe play. Many modern video games offer play that is a hybrid of both striving and make-believe. But even here, the forms of play are

conceptually distinct. Sometimes the forms of play support each other and sometimes they run at cross-purposes.

However, some recent discussion has rejected multi-dimensionality, presuming, instead, that play is singular and uni-dimensional. The usual strategy is to reduce one form of play to a sub-variant of other. A make-believe theorist might treat competitive game like chess as a peculiar sort of improvisational theater, where the players take on imaginary roles - for example, pretending to be enemies. A striving theorist might take a theatrical performance and treat it is as a competitive game - an acting competition, for example, where the actors were all trying to outdo each other. I will argue that these reductions are wrong and that they essentially mischaracterize the complexity of play. One might recognize the notion of multi-dimensionality from one of the seminal works in game studies, Roger Callois' *Man, Play, and Games*. I consider this paper to be, in part, a defense of Callois' view against modern analytic reductionist aggressors. It is, furthermore, an attempt to modernize Callois' view using some of the devices of those aggressors.

Once we've established that play has multiple forms, it will become clear that game-play is *fluid* across these dimensions. The form of game-play is not fixed for a particular game; it is, rather, dependent on player choice. Games cannot be adequately understood just by looking at the bare apparatus; they are ontologically entangled with the acts and choices of game-play. Games are essentially participatory entities, and the participants have quite a bit of leeway in the very nature of the activity they are engaged in.

**Two forms of play**

First, a brief word on the term "play". Bernard Suits notes that there is a colloquial sense of "playing" that does not necessarily involve any game-play - for example, "Chiang is outside playing," which does not entail that Chiang is playing a game. (She might be rolling in the mud and singing a song.) Suits argues that "playing" and "playing games" are logically independent terms. For one, a professional baseball player is, in fact, playing a game, but working rather than playing. For another, somebody idly toying with their mashed potatoes is certainly playing with their food, but not thereby playing a game.[1] My focus here is not on the broader sense of play, but on what exactly it is that we're doing when we are playing a game.

There are at least two prima-facie distinctive views about the nature of game-play. One currently popular view is that game-play is some sort of exercise of the imagination. In one important version, the view emerges as an application of Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe.* Walton argues that our engagement in all forms of representational arts is, in fact, a form of make-believe play. Make-believe, says Walton, is the use of external props as aids to the imagination. When two children play in the forest and pretend that all the tree-stumps are bears, they're using tree stumps as this sort of prop.[2] When a child gallops around the house on a wooden stick and pretends to be a cowboy, the stick and the child's body and the house itself are props for an imagined world. They become, in her imagination: a horse, a weathered cowboy, an Old Western town. Some props are ad hoc, like the tree stumps. They are not intentionally created as props, but have been appropriated for such usage. But other kinds of props are created intentionally. Dolls and toy soldiers, for instance, are created primarily to serve as props for

[1] Suits (1977) 120-1
[2] Walton (1990) 21-4

children's imaginations. Representative arts like movies and novels, says Walton, are also intentionally created props, though usually intended for the adult imagination. Fiction, Walton proposes, is a special class of the representative arts. A fiction is a set of propositions which mandate an imagination. Furthermore, in most fiction, the propositions cohere and describe a fictional world. (What he means by 'proposition' here is quite loose, and includes the propositional claims of paintings and photographs.)

Walton is speaking of imagination in a very rich sense - not only visual imagination, but emotional and psychological. Says Walton, our interaction with a novel or movie is best understood as our imaginatively entering into the fictional world.[3] We imagine the world; we imagine the characters; but most importantly, we imagine *what it is like* to be the characters. We imagine feeling fear, feeling embarrassment, or feeling rage as the characters. The descriptive details of a fiction - the physical description, the description of action and dialogue - are thus aids for our various forms of imagination. Thus, engaging with fiction is a sophisticated refinement of, but importantly continuous with, children's games of make-believe.

Notice the difference between this theory and a theory which treated the representative arts as a form of communication. Communications have a success condition: the stable transmission of some content between the communicator and the audience. When I write a newspaper article, my audience must understand what I meant to say for our communication to have gone well. Walton's theory of make-believe contains no such requirement. A doll, to be a good doll, does not have to successfully transmit a particular narrative or idea from the doll-maker to the doll-player. In fact, part of the success condition of a prop might very well be to be in how richly varied are the imaginations that it prompts. If a doll prompts a child into fantasies unthought of

[3] Walton (1990) 240-274

by the doll-maker, it is thereby an excellent doll. This is not to say a piece of representative art cannot communicate. It may, but it ought always prompt the imagination.

Walton does not provide a complete account of the value of make-believe, but he does provide some tantalizing hints. Says Walton, make-believe worlds are half-way between the real world and pure free imagination. Unlike the real world, make-believe worlds are somewhat malleable and under our control. But unlike pure imaginings, they have an objective component. This means they can surprise us, as when I stumble across an unexpected tree-stump in the woods and the rules, surprisingly, force me to imagine a bear. And make-believe worlds can be shared.[4]

The temptation to apply Walton's make-believe theory to games is strong. Many recent theorists have used a make-believe framework as the foundation for developing an aesthetics of videogames. Tavinor, for example, argues, in *The Art of Videogames,* that video games are art precisely because they are Waltonian fictions. He focuses on videogames with fictively rich settings; these videogames, says Tavinor, are *interactive fictions* - where the details of the depicted content change in response to user input. The interactivity enhances the way in which a user enters the fictional world by integrating the actions of the player into the depicted fictional content.[5] For Tavinor, emotional involvement is one of the chief values of fiction. And interactive games increase emotional involvement by closing the ontological gap between audience and fiction; in particular, it creates a deeper sense of identification and involvement between the player and their in-game avatar. When my in-game avatar is threatened by an in-game ogre, the fact that I must frantically press my controller to flee it enhances my sense of fear and hatred. When I finally cause my in-game avatar to vanquish that ogre through my own deft

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[4] Walton (1990) 67-9
[5] Tavinor (2009) 41-59

manipulations of the controller, my sense of victory is heightened. The fact that our emotional reactions can actually causally effect the fictional depictions - that, for example, my desire to win makes me more focused in my movements, or that my panic at the ogre interferes with those movements - only heightens that involvement.[6] Thus, the striving elements - the difficulty, the challenge, the frustration and the joys of overcoming - serve the familiar aesthetic goal of emotional immersion in an imagined world. Though Tavinor stops short of claiming that this is a complete account of game-play, he does claim that the way in which interactivity draws the player into a deeper emotional involvement with the fiction, and thus more deeply into the fictional world, is where videogames have “the greatest potential to make a distinctive contribution to the arts…”[7] Recently, Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin have made an even more dramatic application of Waltonian theory: that videogames, to the extent that they are fictions, are an example of a special class: self-involving interactive fictions. That is, they are Waltonian fictions with the special property that they make propositions fictionally true not only of characters in the world, but of the players themselves. That is, when Bill, playing Spiderman in a videogame, defeats Galactus, it is not only fictionally true that Spiderman defeated Galactus, but also true that Bill defeated Galactus. In fact, Robson and Meskin claim that the class of “video games” is not a philosophically interesting aesthetic category. Rather, it is the category of self-involving interactive fictions that is worth considering as a new and distinctive aesthetic kind.[8]

Many of these Waltonion applications are quite plausible. A semi-realistic, story-based video game like *Grand Theft Auto* obviously affords its players opportunities for imaginative immersion in a fictional world. Furthermore, the Waltonian framework fits with the responsive nature of games. Games, by their interactivity and their procedural generation of new situations,

[6] Tavinor (2009) 130-49
[7] Tavinor (2009) 133
[8] Robson and Meskin (2016)

may yield situations unimagined by their creators. Under the success condition of communication, this might prove a difficulty, but under the success condition of a prop, it's a perfect fit. Games also seem to fit Walton's ideas about the values of make-believe: games are partially malleable, but partially objective, a pleasant in-between state between reality and pure imagination.

But though make-believe theory can account for some of our interactions with games, I think it is an incomplete account of game-play. For example, sports are paradigmatic examples of games and play, but they do not fit easily inside a make-believe account. In basketball, I'm not using the ball to imagine my way into an alternate world. I am, in fact, hyper-absorbed in the particular details of the real world and the high-velocity objects it contains. The ideal state of sports play is not one of imaginative transport, but one of absorption in the actual.[9] I am similarly absorbed when I play poker. I'm not imagining an alternate world; I'm paying attention to the actual details of this world - which cards actually came out, the little ticks and tells that might clue me in to my opponents' plans.

So what is this sort of play, then, if it isn't make-believe? One compelling account can be found by stepping outside the discussion of fiction and narrative. In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, Bernard Suits attempts to define the term "game". Let's start with what he calls the portable version of the definition:

> Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.[10]

[9] It is striking to me that the connection between video games and sports is rarely discussed in the contemporary literature, while the connection between video games and cinema is constantly highlighted. This is, I believe, a consequence of an excessively narrow conception of play.

[10] Suits (2005) 55.

The goal of running a marathon is not merely to get to the finish line first, for there are far easier ways to do that: cutting across the city or taking a taxi, for example. What it is to play the game is to take up a goal and a series of obstacles to achieving that goal for the sake of making possible the activity of overcoming those obstacles.

Here's the full definition:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by the rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].[11]

The *prelusory goal* is the state of affairs we are trying to achieve, described independently of the game rules. For example, the prelusory goal of golf is to get the ball into the cup. The prelusory goal is to be distinguished from the *lusory goal* - a.k.a. winning the game. To achieve the lusory goal is to achieve the prelusory goal within the rules of the game. The prelusory goal is conceptually independent of a particular game. The lusory goal is not; to achieve the lusory goal, one must follow the c*onstitutive rules* of the game, which prohibit more efficient means in favor of less efficient means. However, the mere existence of inefficient rules is not sufficient to pick out the category of games. Notes Suits, the rules of morality also impose less efficient means on us, but morality is certainly not a game. What makes something a game is the reason that I take up those inefficient means. In morality, I take up the rules in order to be good. In games, I have the *lusory attitude*: I take up the rules of the game in order to make possible the activity of striving inside those inefficient means.

Though Suits presents himself as giving the definition of the term "game", the account he actually gives is of an activity - of what it is to play a game. This conception of game-play as the

[11] Suits (2005) 54-5

voluntary attempt to overcome obstacles I will call "striving play". The conceptual work is Suits', but the term "striving" is my own. This definition, says Suits, will include such activities as chess, basketball, rock climbing, jigsaw puzzles, and, in some circumstances, jazz. Suits does not mention video games explicitly, but this is perhaps forgivable since his book predates the existence of video games by several years. Suits freely admits that his definition isn't a precise delineation of the colloquial sense of "game". Rather, he takes himself to be uncovering the useful conceptual category beneath our colloquial usage.

Packaged inside this definitional work is a distinctive account of the value of playing games. As Thomas Hurka has claimed, Suits' analysis is philosophically interesting, not if it fits precisely all those phenomena that are colloquially called games, but if it provides a persuasive explanation of the value of games {Hurka 2006@220}. In Suits, playing games is an inversion of the usual relationship of means and ends. In practical life, we select the means for the sake of the end. There, the end is valuable independently of the means we take to get it. It is the nature of that end, combined with the inflexible particulars of the world, which conspire to force some particular means upon us. But in game life, we are trying to win for the sake of the activity of those means.[12] The lusory goal of a game is not valuable independently of the means; it is, in fact, valuable only instrumentally. The point of the lusory goal is establish a particular, means-taking activity. In games, the means justifies the end.

Crucially, Suitsian striving and Waltonian make-believe are activities organized around very different purposes. We engage in make-believe play for the sake of the imaginative experience, and in striving play for the sake of overcoming obstacles. The natural reading here, at least for me, is to treat these two forms of play as quite distinct. A simple account of game-play now presents itself. There are at least two distinct forms of play: make-believe and striving.

[12] Suits (2005) 37-45

Sometimes they go together and sometimes they come apart. Children's games of doctor and house are usually pure make-believe; chess, basketball, and *Tetris* are usually pure striving. Graphical video games like *Grand Theft Auto* are typically played in both ways at once, as are tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. We imagine ourselves into an alternate world and then we undertake to overcome obstacles within that alternate world. Often the challenges in the imagined world are linked to challenges in this world. For example, in a video game, I can overcome an imagined physical challenge in the imaginary world (dodging a punch and then tripping my opponent) by overcoming a very different physical challenge in this world (pressing a sequence of buttons in response to images on a screen). But sometimes they are not, as when my character automatically overcomes an obstacle with no input from me during an animated cut-scene.

Some may have noted that this distinction between make-believe and striving bears a striking resemblance to Callois' distinction between agon-play and mimicry-play. My pluralism is, indeed, rooted in Callois. However, the modern conceptions of striving and make-believe here are each significantly wider than in Callois' original conceptions, and all the more useful for it. For example, Callois' conception of agon-play was of competition; it required that there be opposed sides in conflict. Mimicry, on the other hand, was an essentially cooperative activity, as in theater. Thus, concluded Callois, agon-play and mimicry-play were essentially incompatible. The modernized versions are more nuanced. The Suitsian notion of striving play doesn't require that there be two opposed forces vying for victory. Striving play includes competition, but also includes solo activities like racing to beat the clock, and cooperative striving endeavors like mountain climbing. My modernized version of Callois' plurality does not yield the same obvious

incompatibility between striving and make believe. It is thus much more capable of dealing with, say, video games, which often seem to involve both striving and make-believe.

### The irreducibility of make-believe and striving

Some have resisted this multiform approach and instead sought unification and reduction. Suits takes this line explicitly. He claims that striving play is the fundamental form of game-play, and that make-believe simply a subcategory of striving. Says Suits, a children's game of make-believe, like Cops and Robbers, is actually a striving game. It is a game of improvisational theater, where the goal is to keep the story going as long possible. One might have missed the ludic nature of Cops and Robbers because there seems to be no victory condition. But, says Suits, having a victory condition is a not necessary condition of being a game. Take a game of having a ping-pong volley. Two players are trying to keep the ball going as long as possible. There is no victory condition, only a loss condition, but that's enough for the activity to count as a game. There is a prelusory goal (keeping the ball going for as long as possible), restrictions on efficient means (using only paddles and bouncing the ball only so-many times), and we take up the restrictions for the sake of making the activity possible. The ping-pong volley example makes it clear that striving play does not require a victory condition; a loss condition is sufficient. Concludes Suits: Cops and Robbers is an improvisational acting volley where players try to keep the story going for as long as possible, against the demands of narrative continuity and the restrictions of genre rules.[13]

[13] Suits (2005)

Waltonians and other fiction-oriented interpreters of games seem to make the opposite reduction. This reduction isn't usually made so explicitly. First, we might note the tendency in contemporary philosophical aesthetics to discuss videogames primarily as types of fictions. We can catch whiffs of an assimilative tendency in various attempts to make out the value of games in terms of their fictional elements, such as Tavinor's and James Paul Gee's claims that the art-status of games requires emotionally meaningful story-elements.[14] But the reduction can be found in its clearest forms in one of the well-springs of modern thinking about games, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Competitive games, says Huizinga, are descendants of older forms of life: theater and religious ritual. In games, as in theater and ritual, there is a sacred space, set apart from regular life, which he calls the magic circle. When we enter into the magic circle, we take up new roles. Friends take up the role of aggressors. Cafe patrons begin a game of chess and take on the roles of medieval warlords. Inside the magic circle, new rules apply, sustained by our imagination - rules about what kind of motion is permitted, and what kind is not. We add new significance into the game. And when the game ends, we shake hands, and it all goes away.[15] Let me reconstruct a version of this reductionism with the language I've developed. Striving games are a sub-category of make-believe play, because all striving play involves the use of props to generate imaginations. Specifically, in games, we are imagining that another person is our enemy, that points are valuable, and that the prelusory goal has some importance.

I think both these reductions are mistaken. I argue, instead, for a pluralism of game-play forms. Pluralism about game-play is a view held by many game designers; consider this a theoretical defense and clarification of their observational commonplace. I claim that make-believe play and striving play are conceptually distinct, and game-play should be viewed as a

[14] Gee (2006)

[15] Huizinga (1971) 7-24. Modernized versions of the magic circle theory can be found in Salen and Zimmerman (2004), Stenros (2012), and Waern (2012).

complex interaction of at least two distinct forms of play. Theorists caught within a singular model of game-play tend to mischaracterize or ignore the other.

First, we can imagine each form of game-play separately. Some games seem to support striving play without much make-believe at all. Sports play, for example, is typically pure striving and no make-believe. Make-believe is marked by mental travel away from the props' real-world existence. Sports play, as I've noted, is marked by a lack of mental travel, a hyper-attention to the present moment and its particularities. "Serious" board games, like chess, are another example. The serious poker player is absorbed in the real details of that particular gaming situation - which cards are out, the probabilities of future card draws, tiny clues to the emotional states of her opponents.[16]

But, one might respond, the imagination shows up in the most seemingly pure of striving games. The chess player imagines the possible responses of his opponent to his possible plays, and so explores the logical space of the game. The tennis player imagines different flight paths he could give the ball, and imagines how the opponent would react to each different option. But this does not establish the reduction. First, not all instances of striving play involve the imagination. Think of the basketball player catching a pass and dunking it, reacting with skill and instincts built from years of practice; think of a marathon runner pushing through the lactic acid burn. Much high-level sports play happens faster than thought; athletes speak of the mind disappearing, the body taking over. Second, even when the imagination is engaged in a pure striving game, the imagination's use is heavily circumscribed and merely instrumental. In make-believe play, imagination is the purpose. When I read Jane Austen, the more imaginatively

[16] Some might respond to this tack by refusing to consider sports as "games", and calling them instead "athletic endeavors". I do not care what we call them, but the re-naming does nothing to change the point I am trying to make: that there two distinct forms of activity that we engage in, that interweave in fascinating ways.

absorbed I become, the more successful the make-believe. But when I use my imagination in poker, the imagination is a mere instrument. I imagine only so far as it helps me win. If, in trying to figure out whether my opponent is bluffing, I become so absorbed in imagining my opponent's psychological state that I become involved in a rich imagination about his romantic problems and his childhood traumas, I am not thereby succeeding at poker - I am getting distracted.

Just as there is pure striving play, there is also pure make-believe play. Children's games of make-believe - Cowboys and Indians, and Cops and Robbers, playing Doctor, playing House - are examples of play that are almost entirely make-believe, with little to no striving element. Suits, of course, will deny this by claiming that Cops and Robbers is simply an improvisational acting game, with the goal of keeping the action going as long as possible.

First, this description is simply wrong. When children play at Cowboys and Indians, they aren't simply trying to make the story last as long as possible. There are simple devices to make a story go on as long as possible: the players could pretend to have incredible capacities for dodging, or pretend to arise from the dead, or, as Thomas Hurka points out, decide to run around in a circle chasing each other at the same speed, thereby successfully counting as chasing each other for as long as they pleased.[17] Any of these choices would fulfill the goal of keeping the action going as long as possible. The very fact that a child is willing to pretend to be shot, to fall dramatically and die in a way that ends the narrative decisively, shows that the activity is not much like a ping-pong volley at all. The children are doing it because they want to take part in a satisfying story. They want to imagine and take part in a thrilling climax. Suits' particular account of children's make-believe games as a kind of acting volley is surely wrong, because children often seem willing to sacrifice the length of play for the sake of a dramatic narrative arc.

[17] <<Is this reference in your paper that's being published in this volume?>>

But perhaps this is a minor error in describing the details of the game. Perhaps make-believe could be understood as a striving game of creating the most dramatic possible story, or something along those lines. But, though such a striving game is possible, it can't account for all forms of make-believe play. Striving-play is not any goal-directed activity; it is an activity of taking up obstacles *for the sake of the activity of overcoming the obstacles*. Therapy, building construction, and cancer research are usually not striving games. They are usually straightforwardly practical acts, done for the sake of their end goals. In striving play, we take up the end for the sake of the means it will force on us. Make-believe play can occur for the sake of the imagination itself, and not for the sake of the challenges involved in achieving that imagination.

It will be useful to reflect on some of the other reasons we might take on voluntary restrictions to a creative endeavors. It is a commonplace that artists often voluntarily accept various obstructions and restrictions as stimulants to the creative process - such as, for instance, various poetic forms. An extended examination of creative obstructions occurs in the marvelous film *The Five Obstructions*, a documentary by Lars von Trier. In it, von Trier attempts to awaken his mentor, Jorgen Leth, from a decade-long creative depression. Von Trier suggests that Leth has become trapped inside his own predictable, suffocating style. Von Trier's solution is to force Leth to remake Leth's own most famous film, *The Perfect Human*, five times, but each time subject to new and increasingly byzantine and cruel restrictions on his filmmaking methods as imposed by von Trier. For example, in the first remake, Leth, who prefers long static shots in meticulously contrived settings, is required to keep all his shots to no longer than half a second and to shoot with no set. In the second remake, Leth is required to shoot the film in the worst place in the world, but to not show that place at all within the film itself.

These restrictions may make the process look superficially like a striving game, but it is not. Here the creative artist takes up the obstacles for the sake of goading his own creativity, and the sake of producing a good film. The obstacles here are merely instruments chosen as practical goads to help achieve an independently valuable goal. This becomes clear in the second remake, where Leth breaks the rules rather impishly. Leth actually shoots the remake - which involves a luxuriously dressed gentlemen consuming lobster and dancing and drinking champagne - in the slums of Mumbai, in front of a pure white screen, supposedly there to block the slums from view. But he chooses a translucent screen, and the surrounding crowds of impoverished slum-dwellers are subtly visible, their hands and faces pressed up against the screen, watching the whole film-making process. And *The Five Obstructions* clearly treats the second remake as an artistic success (though van Trier spends some time pretending to be infuriated by it on-screen). It's the emotional turning point in the film, the moment when Leth suddenly seems to come artistically awake and alive again. It is a victory. This demonstrates that the activity was not a striving game at all, but an artistic project. Suits himself makes a similar point about sonnets: if artistic expression is the goal, then the artist will be willing to bend and break the rules of the sonnet if it helps perfect her artistic expression.[18]

Notice, though, that one could also engage in an activity that, though superficially similar, would actually count as a striving game. If I took up those restrictions on film-making just for the sake of the activity of trying to make a film under those restrictions, then I would have a lusory attitude rather than a practical attitude and I would be playing a Suitsian game. Insofar as I was playing a game, however, breaking the rules could never constitute a victory, since pursuing the lusory goal within the restrictions of the rules was the whole point. And this subtle

[18] Suits (1985) 212-5

dependence on player intention shouldn't be surprising to us at all, for the key element in the Suitsian account of a game is an intentional one - the lusory attitude.

And it could, indeed, be that children could sometimes be playing a striving game of attempting to tell a dramatic narrative under certain restrictions. But it usually seems much more likely that children are playing games of make-believe primarily for the sake of their narrative involvement. For most cases of children playing Cops and Robbers, the rules are sometimes bent, but a better narrative is thereby produced, and this is usually counted as a success. Contrast this with, for example, formal acting games played by improvisational acting groups. In one common activity, improv comedians take random suggestions from the audience and immediately act out scenes from them while trying to be as funny as possible. This is surely at least partially a striving game: there are obstacles, put in place to make the task harder, and they are put there for the sake of the activity is overcoming those obstacles. Creating comedy within those restrictions is the point. Improv comedy acts like this are clearly striving games because we can easily imagine how one might break the rules, and that such breakages would ruin the activity. If the actors secretly planted fake audience members and used pre-planned prompts and scripts to avoid having to improvise, this would be cheating, and they would be run out of the improv community.

This suggests a different angle from which to view the forms of game-play. We can clearly see the distinction between striving and make-believe by seeing how differently they break. Striving play, says Suits, is broken by the *cheat*. The cheat, says Suits, acknowledges the goal of the game, but not the authority of the rules. The cheat secretly breaks the rules to generate the illusion of a win.[19] But cheating is not the only way to break play. Huizinga distinguishes between the cheat, who subverts the game from within game-play, and the spoilsport, who

[19] Suits (2005) 59-60

withdraws from the game entirely.[20] The cheat breaks the rules, but he does so while pretending to follow them. In doing so, the cheat maintains the illusion. He has to, in order to get what he's really after: the appearance of a win. But, says Huizinga, the spoilsport shatters the illusion of play for the other players.

> …The spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*…[21]

We can adapt Huizinga's thought to fit our current vein of analysis, by substitution the notion of imaginative immersion in a fictional world for his notion of illusion. Here, then, is the argument that there are multiple forms of play. Make believe and striving are clearly distinct activities because they break in distinctive ways. Make-believe play is broken by the spoil-sport, who shatters the imaginative immersion of make-believe play; striving play is broken by the cheat, who breaks the rules of play.

The difference is easiest to see in cases of pure make-believe and pure striving. When children are playing House, and somebody pauses to ask what the rules are, the others might become frustrated, for the question has shattered their absorption in the imagined world. When two people are playing chess, on the other hand and one player pauses to ask for a point of clarification about, say, the rule of en passant pawn capture, this cannot break the imaginative immersion of play, for there is no imagination to break. One can cheat at chess, but one cannot be a spoilsport at chess.

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[20] Suits (2005) 60, mentions the term "spoilsport" briefly as somebody who does not recognize the importance of the game at all. This does not strike me as satisfying, for, under Suits' account, a passerby would count as a spoilsport. I take Huizinga's version to be significantly more fleshed out. Suits has no discussion of the illusion or imagination in game play, which may explain why his notion of the spoilsport is underdeveloped.

[21] Huizinga (1950) 11

It seems important that it is marginally possible to imagine cheating in Cops and Robbers. Suppose a child who was shot with an imaginary pistol at point-blank range failed to pretend to die, or even to be shot at all. We could easily see this devolving into an argument where the other children accused the immortal child of cheating - of not abiding by the restriction of treating imaginary pistols as obeying something like the normal laws of physics for real pistols. This would indicate that, for those children, Cops and Robbers was being played as a hybrid game with both make-believe and striving elements. But it is very hard to imagine how a child could cheat at House, or Doctor, or at having a tea-party with their stuffed animals. There are no rules that a child could break, no obstacles they could subvert. This gives us our best response to the Suitsian reduction. Striving play involves voluntarily taking up obstacles, and so always opens up the possibility of cheating - for subverting these obstacles to create the illusion of successfully overcoming them. The fact that we cannot imagine what it would be to cheat at playing House shows that House is quite lacking in obstacles and constraints, and thus that playing House doesn't involves any striving at all.

We can also see the distinction even in those games that partake of both sorts of play. When a group of players are playing a fantasy role playing game, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, it often seems that they care both about the pleasures of overcoming obstacles and the pleasure of imaginative absorption. But we can see that these are still conceptually distinct forms of play, because it is possible to break play in two entirely distinct ways. A player that quietly erases her character sheet and changes the amount of gold and experience points she's accumulated is a cheat, but hasn't shattered the imaginative illusion. On the other hand, a player that constantly calls for rules clarifications and accuses other players of not playing by the rules is not a cheat, but she is a spoilsport - she is shattering the shared illusion. In fact, there is a special term for

such a person among game-players - they are a “rules lawyer” and they are certainly terrible to play role-playing games with, but they are the very opposite of a cheat. Similarly, players who act out of character for the sake of points, or take advantage of rules loopholes, or continuously distract everybody else by talking about what happened on last night’s episode of *Game of Thrones*, are spoilsporting, but not cheating.

A truly devoted Waltonite might respond in the following way: striving is always underwritten by make-believe. What we’re doing when we’re playing a striving game is using environmental elements as props in a subtle, but crucial way. Take, for instance, a game of tennis. Even when we are absorbed in the present moment and its physical details, there is still a subtle fictiveness, and a crucial use of the imagination, for we are infusing dull matter with meaning. The white lines on the tennis court are, outside of the game, simply paint strips, but in play we transform them into crucial boundaries. Outside of play, the ball is a trivial object, but during the game, the ball becomes all-important. They are not visual transformations, but normative transformations, establishing a fictive set of values and rules, which can be created and destroyed at will.[22]

Even if this Waltonian reading were correct, it would not undermine the distinction between make-believe and striving. First, a brute example. Imagine that I am an ex-special forces scout, and terribly bored by my new desk-bound life. I arrange to have myself dropped into a remote part of Alaska in the late fall, for the challenge of escaping the wilderness before winter kills me. Here, there is no use of the imagination at all, because the dangers are entirely non-fictive. I treat the wolves and the cold as dangerous because they really are. Once we see the category, other

[22] I owe this objection to Scott Clifton.

examples of wholly non-imaginative striving play come easily to mind: river-running, mountaineering, free-solo rock climbing, and, in certain moods, picking a fight in a bar.

The tennis example doesn't show that striving is a conceptual sub-form of make-believe. Rather, it shows is that make-believe can be an excellent technique for producing good environments for striving. The make-believe technique has much to recommend it: cheap, portable, convenient, and more controllable. We can set aside the fictive dangers for the sake of safety or even a quick beer break, as the mood strikes us. But make-believe is not the only way to have an environment fit for striving. We can also travel to them, or even build them - as when we make hedge mazes, obstacle courses, and snow-boarding half-pipes.

The distinction between the two senses of play begins to make clear a continuum in striving play, and its reliance on the imagination. In some play, the constraints and obstacles are present as rules, and so require our mental cooperation to instantiate as constraints and obstacles. But in other sorts of games, the obstacles are actual. We can even see the same sort of activity emerge in environments that are differentially supported by the imagination. A paper maze, a hedge-maze, and cave diving offer perhaps structurally similar navigational challenges, but they vary heavily in the degree of mental participation required to bring the restrictive environment into being. In a paper maze, the limits are wholly imagined; we erect them using the lines of the maze as a prop. On a hedge maze, the walls are more real, but we cooperate with them to fully realize their existence as boundaries. We pretend that we cannot possibly force our way through the hedge, or clamber over it. We transform the hedge walls, with an exercise of the imagination, from mild barriers to impenetrable boundaries. But for the recreational cave diver, the walls are real, genuinely impenetrable, and potentially deadly.

## The Fluidity of Play

I've been arguing for a conceptual distinction between striving and make-believe by focusing on extreme cases - pure striving and pure make-believe. But these are only the extreme cases; game-play is often a hybrid of striving and make-believe. Some games seem to encourage make-believe play with a healthy splash of striving - table-top role playing games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Some games seem to encourage striving play with a touch of make-believe: arcade games like *Street Fighter 2*, and many modern German board-games, which often offer a thin thematic veneer over fairly abstract play. And many modern graphical video games like *Grand Theft Auto* seem perched right in the middle of the continuum, designed to offer just as many opportunities for make-believe as striving.

I have spoken so far of games "encouraging" a certain type of play, rather than requiring it. Let me be more explicit now about what I mean. There seems to be an unspoken presumption in much talk about games that the fixed components of the game - such as the board, the rules, the software – make up the primary entity of consideration, and that these fixed components decide the form of play. But I think, instead, that game-play is fluid. The same game can be played in different ways and the form of game-play is up to the player.

*World of Warcraft* is an easy example. It's common currency among the playing community, and among game designers, that different people play the game in different ways. Some play for the fantasy - they want to, for example, live out a make-believe life as a shopkeeper in a medieval town. For these players, it's very important to stay in character, to speak only in the terms of the fantasy world, to preserve the illusion. Others play the game entirely as a striving

game, seeking to work the system as efficiently as possible to amass the greatest amount of experience points and wealth. Such players typically have no problems shattering the illusion in service of their striving goals - they talk freely in-game about the rules of the game and exploiting gaps in the system. A majority of players seem to be interested in both, to varying degrees.

The deep differences between these forms of play go a long way towards explaining various frictions between the player types. One kind of player will exploit every aspect of a game-system to maximize their points - using bugs in the programming to transport in strange ways through the landscape, discovering unplanned loopholes that make it easy to gain experience points quickly, or "save spamming" - saving and re-loading the game constantly to find the optimally point-rich path. The disgust that other players have for this kind of behavior is rooted in a difference of play goals. The make-believe players cannot imagine taking advantage of a bug in the system, for this ruins the sense of reality in the imagined fantasy world. The striving player sees no reason not to.

These differences in attitude exist in many other games. There is, for instance, evidence that high-level players of graphical shooting games turn down the quality of the graphics to get better processing capacity, and so improve their tournament performance.[23] These players are choosing to engage with the striving aspect of the game and sacrificing some of its capacity to inspire make-believe. And although serious tournament chess-players usually disdain novelty chess sets, like *Lord of the Rings* themed sets, other players prefer them. Tournament chess-players complain that the non-standard chess pieces get in the way of their ingrained chess-vision, and hinder optimally competitive play. Presumably, those who purchase and use a *Lord of the Rings* chess set are doing so to engage in the fantasy of being Gandalf or Sauron, directing the action in

[23] Juul (2011)

a fight for the fate of the land. But these play styles are not fixed. Tournament players may find themselves stuck with a *Lord of the Rings* chess set and, after a few mocking words, play a purely competitive game of chess. And I myself have played young children who, even with a traditional abstract board, seemed far more interested in pretending to be king, and ordering mad dramatic dashes of his knights, than in strategic play.

I owe some of these insights to Ron Edwards, a game designer and the founder of *The Forge*, an on-line community dedicated to innovations in tabletop role-playing game design. Edwards claims that he constantly sees friction within tabletop role-playing groups, and he attributes the friction to an unrealized difference in the purpose of play. Edwards suggests that there are three distinct reasons people play role-playing games; he calls them Narrativism, Gamism, and Simulationism. Narrativism is the interest in stories, emotional engagement, and imaginative absorption. Gamism is the interest in fair competition between players under a stable set of rules. Simulationism is the interest in working out alternate histories and alternate societies, with some eye towards realism. It is possible for multiple game styles to be engaged in simultaneously, but cross-purposes lead to friction. Pure Narrativist play would frustrate pure Gamists, for the Gamists might not understand why a player was sacrificing the play that would yield the most experience points in acting out the impractical reaction of a drunken, raging barbarian. Similarly, pure Narrativists would be alienated by the Gamists' refusal to enter into the illusion of play. Edwards' solution: groups should be explicit about what their goals were, and game-designers should be explicit about the kinds of play supported by their games.[24]

I take myself to have made two distinct, but interrelated points. First, there are multiple forms of game-play, which are irreducible to one other. Second, game-play is fluid: the kind of play is dependent on a voluntary choice of the player, and not fixed by the game. Thus, a particular

[24] Edwards (2003a), Edwards (2003b), Edwards (2003c)

game can serve as a setting for different sorts of play in different instances. Certainly, games can be designed with the intention of supporting a certain play-style. The abstraction and strategic complexity of chess make it a happy home for pure striving players. The graphical richness and the environmental immersiveness of *Grand Theft Auto* seem designed to support make-believe play, while the point structure seems designed to support striving play. But how the game is designed does not determine the way the game is actually played.

The fluidity of play seems obvious once we've seen how different the two forms of play are. But we also have, now, the resources to explain why the style of play is set by the player, not the game. Walton's account of make-believe and Suits' definition of striving depend essentially on voluntary factors of play. Walton's conception of make-believe is of a mental action, where a player takes a prop and uses it to inspire an imagination; something's being make-believe depends on the free mental action of the make-believer. Suits' definition of striving is that the player voluntarily takes up obstacles for the sake of the activity of overcoming them. This definition makes striving not simply dependent on the actions of the player, but on their reasons and intentions for engaging in play: it must be for the sake of the obstacle-overcoming activity. Thus it is impossible to ascribe make-believe or striving to an inert game-object - a collection of pieces, a collection of rules, a program. A game may encourage a particular kind of play, but the actual form of play depends on the player's mental participation.

Others have identified something like these two forms of play, but have not made the further claim of fluidity. For example, Waern distinguishes between two factors of playing games: that they are "paratelic" (that is, played for internal and experiential reasons) and that they involve players agreeing to re-signify their in-game actions (that is, the actions have new meanings

during game-play).[25] However, she immediately goes on to assign fixed forms of play to particular categories of games.

The fluidity of play is an extremely fruitful concept. Once we have seen it, new applications beckon, even outside the realm of what are usually called "games". Mysteries, for example, allow for an interesting hybrid of make-believe and striving.[26] When I read a Sherlock Holmes story, I can be absorbed in the usual make-believe of reading fiction, but I can also engaged in a striving game. I am trying to hunt for the clues, and figure out the solution before the story reveals it to me explicitly. And I could have found out the answer simply by flipping to the last page, but I choose not to, for I prefer the challenge of trying to figure it out on my own. Of course, not all readers will try to out-guess Sherlock. Some simply sit back and let the story roll in - which simply goes to show, again, that play is fluid, and that the same object may inspire very different mixes of play in different people.[27]

Suits himself discussed this possibility, when he analyzed detective stories as two-move puzzle games, where the author makes her move in setting the puzzle, and then the reader makes his, in attempting to deduce the culprit. But who or what is responsible for making a detective story into a game? Suits seems to hesitate between two options. In one place, he seems to speak as if the style of play is built into the novel itself: some novels, he says, consist only of puzzle-elements with little to no character development or setting; others mix in novelistic elements of

[25] Waern (2012b). Waern's way of chopping up the space is similar to, but subtly different from mine. For one, she is engaging with the recent debate in the field of game studies, where I am engaging with recent debate in analytic aesthetics and analytic work on games. The relationship between her version of the distinction and mine are certainly worth future consideration.

[26] This application suggested by Servaas van der Berg and Madeleine Thomas.

[27] It has been suggested to me, with an unclear amount of tongue-in-cheek, that the same may be said of different reading cultures. Many ordinary people read Jane Austen in an act of make-believe play, but academics are engaged in a striving game of seeing how well they can fit the text to their favored theory.

character with the puzzle-elements; and others have barely any or no puzzle elements at all.[28] But elsewhere, he points out that readers may perfectly reasonably choose to enjoy the surprise of the final revelation, and not attempt to solve the puzzle for themselves, because they wish to be surprised.[29] My analysis points decisively towards the second option. But the analysis also suggests a more complex picture of the possible motivations than Suits offered. Another reason for reading a detective fiction is to play at make-believe, to imaginatively enter into the fictional world - a very different motivation from merely wishing to be surprised by the solution to the puzzle. Suits' reading suggests that, for a detective story with a puzzle, the only way to engage with it is to engage with the puzzle in one way or another: one either tries to solve it for oneself, or waits to be surprised by the solution. But if I'm right, the reader can simply choose another option - not to engage with the puzzle at all, but simply immerse themselves in that fictional world. More importantly, they can slide freely between different levels of imaginative and challenge-oriented engagement.

**Conclusions**

Let me point out two outcomes for this analysis that might be useful for the contemporary discussion of games. First, I'm hoping to make these older theories a little more enticing for thinking about modern games. The Suitsian treatment of game-play is relatively unpopular in much academic work on games, especially in the new field of game studies. It is often thought that Suits cannot cope with the nature of modern games, especially videogames, for various

[28] Suits (1985) 207-8
[29] Suits (1985) 212

reasons.[30] And if one presumed that game-play was singular, then one might very plausibly be lead to reject Suits when faced with many modern games. Annika Waern has wondered whether Suits would really have offered his account, confronted with open-ended simulation games like *SimCity*, and the obviously narrative role-playing games prevalent in modern computer gaming.[31] It is clear that, for modern computer narrative role-playing games, many players are not engaged in striving play - an indicator is the willingness of many players to dial down the difficulty level to something negligible, or use difficulty-eliminating cheats, in order to experience the story. These sorts of phenomena are not confined to computer games. Jesper Juul famously treats table-top roleplaying games as a borderline case for games, because players are willing to bend or break the rules in play, presumably for the sake of achieving a better narrative.[32] The implied argument seems to be that they table-top role playing games always fail to be striving games, because of this willingness. In my view, this is an overgeneralization. Rather, it seems to me that different players will play tabletop games in different ways; some players insist on playing by the rules, and overcoming obstacles inside those rules; others are willing to sacrifice the rules for the sake of an interesting narrative. And nothing holds the players to one sort of play. It is entirely possible that players who begin in a mode of striving play might become impressed by a narrative arc and change their play form. But this should not be taken to show that Suits is useless to describe modern games, only that Suits is merely part of the picture. I propose, then, the following revision: contra Suits himself, the notion of overcoming voluntary obstacles is not a complete description of what counts as playing a game. It is, rather, a clear and useful account of one way to play a game.

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[30] Juul (2011), Waern (2012b)
[31] Wearn (2012a)
[32] Juul (2011) 43

But, to my mind, the most interesting place that pluralism leads us to is the analysis of the relationship between these two forms of play. First, we have a very interesting question: why do these two forms of play so often cohabit? Perhaps my earlier suggestion, that imagination is an efficient way to construct gaming environments, is one sort of answer, but surely there is more to say. But more importantly, we are led to think about the ways in which that cohabitation succeeds and fails. Jesper Juul has charted a number of ways in which game rules and fictions can conflict. Some are problematic, such as when the fictional world presents possible actions which the mechanical rules do not permit, like graphical doors that cannot be opened. In other cases, incongruities can be amusing, or satirical.[33] Game designer Clint Hocking famously pointed to a kind of aesthetic flaw which he called "ludonarrative dissonance" - a dissonance between what a game is about as a game and what it is about as a story.[34] Take, for example, *Bioshock*. The story is a clear critique of Randian objectivism and pure unfettered self-interest, but the game mechanics permit the player to act in purely self-interested way and even rewards such self-interested behavior. "By throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all," says Hocking.

What I am suggesting is distinct from, but closely related to, Hocking's idea. Hocking's dissonance is between the two meanings conveyed by two different parts of the game, a clash of contents. I am suggesting that games can also have a dissonance or assonance between the different forms of play. In some game designs, the two forms of play can function

[33] Juul (2011) 177-84. It should be noted that my conclusions here are very similar in spirit to Juul's. Juul's work, however, is addressed to another discipline, and does not engage with Walton, and barely with Suits. One contribution of this engagement is that helps makes clear the theoretical and intentional basis for the fluidity of play, which Juul considers only briefly, and presents largely as an empirical observation.

[34] Hocking (2007)

antagonistically to each other. Ron Edwards' criticisms of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* matches my own experience of many tabletop and computer role-playing games: that playing to win can force one to act in a way that tears one out of the fictional immersion. For example: suppose I am playing a barbarian with a low intelligence score. To play in character, I ought to play the barbarian stupidly. However, the game system doesn't incentivize playing stupidly. In fact, it does the opposite. The game offers experience points and gold for successfully dispatching enemies, and the best path there is often through breaking character in rules-permitted ways. Parts of the role-playing community even have a disparaging name for somebody that chooses character-based role-playing over optimizing for points by the game's incentive structure - they call such a person a 'flashlight dropper', named for a case in which a player decides to have their character, in the face of some terrifying enemy, drop their flashlight and run away.[35] The problem with this game design is that it produces dissonance between make-believe play and striving play.

But game designers can create assonance between the forms of play through clever design. Take the indie role-playing system *FATE*. In *FATE*, one's character has character traits, called "aspects". The game rules direct the players to create aspects that are neither plainly good nor plainly bad. My character's aspect might be, for instance, "stubborn as a mule". The game then rewards the players with "fate points" for getting their character into trouble in accordance with those aspects. But later, the players can redeem those fate points for in-game benefits, including gaining in-game advantages from those very same aspects.[36] For example, my character might idiotically refuse to let another person help him out of his stubbornness and gain a fate point; later, I can redeem that fate point for a bonus to my attempt to resist torture through my

[35] 2097 (2015)
[36] Balsera et al (2013)

stubbornness. Notice the resonance between the play-types here. First, I am incentivized to play in-character, and playing in character will also lead to in-game success. Second, the way that I am incentivized to play in character tends to generate precisely the kinds of narratives that players want to be immersed in. After all, what's more satisfying than when the hero of the story gets into trouble because of their most prominent character trait, and then redeems themselves by using that very same trait?

This paper has taken only a small set of early steps towards understanding the relationships between games and the forms of game-play. Once we are convinced of the multiplicity and fluidity of game-play, then we can begin to frame a set of larger, and, to my mind, much more interesting questions about the variability of play. For example: I have argued only that a player *can* play in any way that she wishes; I have not considered whether there are norms about how the player ought to play. Are some games better suited to certain game-play styles? Can game-designers somehow authorize or mandate certain play-forms, and would a failure to play accordingly constitute some failure of receptivity? The multiplicity of game-play forms also leads to questions about their compatibility. First, we have already begun to consider intra-player compatibility: that is, the whether make-believe and striving play, as engaged in at the same time by one player, support or interfere with each other. But another desirable feature of some kinds of multiplayer games might be inter-player compatibility: the ability to happily support a diversity of play-styles among different, interacting players. How might this be achieved? Finally, it seems very striking the degree to which make-believe and striving often appear together in game-play, especially in modern computer games. One possibility is that this co-occurrence is merely a contingent feature of the particular cultural history of video games. But there is other, more tantalizing possibilities. Perhaps there is some structural reason that

make-believe play and striving play are inherently compatible. Or, perhaps human beings get something out of performing these two distinct activities simultaneously, and so we have reason to, through ingenuity and clever design, bring these two disparate activities together.

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