The Playing of Games: Kierkegaard's Influence on Two Elements of Suits' Tricky Triad

El jugar a juegos: la influencia de Kierkegaard en dos elementos de la tríada lúdica de Suits

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Abstract

Bernard Suits is well known for his metaphysical analyses of play, games and sport–what he calls the "Tricky Triad." Suits engaged in a published discussion with Klaus Meier regarding the triad and the relationship between the three phenomena. These two scholars disagreed on the relationship between game and sport, leaving other relationships without further analysis. In this article, I seek a deeper understanding of the relationship between play and games, both of which I argue have their roots in boredom. In order to better understand the relationship, I analyze Kierkegaard's principles of limitation, arbitrariness, and consistency as the foundation of Suits' arguments on the matter. Indeed, by digging deeper into Kierkegaard's influence on Suits, we are better able to understand the relationship between play and games. I argue specifically that increased familiarity with games correlates with a dampening of the fragility of play and that games provide nuance for play in order to sustain the latter once the novelty of play experiences wear off.

Key words: play, games, sport, Suits, Kierkegaard.

Resumen

Bernard Suits es famoso por su análisis metafísico del jugar, el juego y el deporte-a lo que él llama "triada engañosa". Suits llevó a cabo un intercambio de artículos científicos con Klaus Meier relativo a la tríada y la relación entre los tres fenómenos. Estos dos académicos mostraron su desacuerdo relativo a la relación entre el juego y el deporte, dejando el resto de relaciones sin analizar. En este artículo, busco una compresión más en profundidad de la relación entr e jugar y juego, los cuales he afirmado tienen sus raíces en el aburrimiento. Para comprender la relación mejor, analizo los principios de limitación, arbitrariedad y consistencia de Kierkegaard como fundamento de los argumentos de Suits al respecto. De este modo, profundizando en la influencia de Kierkegaard sobre Suits, podemos entender mejor la relación entre el jugar y el juego. En concreto, defiendo que el incremento en la familiaridad con los juegos está correlacionado con la reducción de la fragilidad del jugar y que los juegos proporcionan solidez para el jugar con el fin de sostener a este último cuando la novedad de la experiencia del jugar decae.

Palabras clave: jugar, juego, deporte, Suits, Kierkegaard.

Bernard Suits opened his 1988 article titled, "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport," with a disclosure. "Since I have already published individual articles on games, play, and sport," he admits, "one might ask why I am coming around again to peddle commodities that have already been merchandised" (1988: 1). By this point, Suits had developed a reputation as a leading scholar on the philosophy of play and games. Indeed, his work was widely disseminated and well known. Thus, the "Tricky Triad" audience knew that this introduction came with standard Suitsean humor, openly questioning himself and using cliched jargon from outside philosophy. Suits answered his question with two reasons: he changed his views "in some important ways about play and sport (though not about games)," and he became "more interested in this inquiry in relations among the three" than "in distinctions between them" (1988: 1). It is this second rationale that provides half of the impetus for this paper.

The other Suits quote that begat this endeavor falls much farther into his arguments but garners no less importance. Indeed, Suits even italicizes the line when he says, "*Boredom is the mother of play*" (1988: 5). And immediately after making this proclamation, he takes 26 words through four sentences to say what could have been said in six: he got this idea from Kierkegaard. This digression is classic Suits as he avoids the most expedient way to present his argument and instead playfully (or, rather, "game-fully") takes a roundabout route to get there. This digression also reveals the direct ways in which the Danish philosopher shaped Suits' views on play. However, this influence is largely hidden within Suits' body of work, especially considering Suits' parsimonious use of citations, notations, and references. The disclosure of Kierkegaard's influence will reveal more about the relationship between play and games.

In this paper, I will attempt to further delineate the normative relationship between play and games, arguing for two specific characteristics drawn from three Kierkegaardian principles that informed Suits' work on the "Tricky Triad." First, increasing familiarity with games correlates with a dampening of the fragility of the play spirit, especially when entering the play world. Second, games provide nuance for play in order to sustain the latter once the novelty of play experiences wear off. In doing this, I will first describe the "Tricky Triad" arguments between Suits and Klaus Meier before explaining Kierkegaard's influence on Suits–the principles of limitation, arbitrariness, and consistency–that the latter promotes and how that reveals characteristics of the close relationship between play and games. That relationship is one of mutual reinforcement. By better understanding the Kierkegaardian ideas that influenced Suits, we will hopefully come to better understand both Suits and the relationship between play and games.

The Tricky Triad

Suits, the progenitor of the "Tricky Triad" discussion, most clearly elucidates his views on the relationships between play, games and sport using a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles–one for each of the triad's phenomena. The Play circle, for instance, overlaps both the Game and Sport circles, just as they also overlap each other. Thus, there are seven sections within the diagram: one that is play and not a game or sport, one that is play and a game but not sport, one that is play and sport but not a game, one that is just sport and not play or a game, one that is sport and a game but not play, one that is just a game and not play or sport, and one that is all three (Suits, 1988: 7). The crux of the "Tricky Triad" discussion between Suits and Meier had to do with the nature of sport. Meier countered Suits' Venn diagram with one of this own. However, instead of three distinct but overlapping circles, Meier's was different. He had a circle for play and a circle for game, and those two overlapped. His circle for sport, however, overlapped with play but resided totally within the game circle (Meier, 1988: 26).

In other words, Meier believed that the sections of Suits' diagram in which there was sport but not play or a game and sport and play but not a game were null sets. Suits delineated between games and performances. Some sports are games, such as football, basketball, or swimming, he argues, and some sports are not games. Gymnastics and diving, for instance, are sports according to Suits but are not games. He thus classifies them as performances. This is a distinction that Meier is unwilling to make (Meier, 1988).

While this disagreement has spawned a great deal of discussion (if not scholarship) regarding the relationship between games and sport and the definition of sport, Suits and Meier have neglected to further discuss the relationship between play and games–a relationship that I think begs for further and deeper investigation. In fact, it seems to be among the greatest oversights within scholarly manifestations on Suits' body of work that the relationship between games and play has not been further articulated. In a 1977 article, Suits argues that the two distinct phenomena have no necessary or logical connection (120). However, Suits uses the term "game-playing" as that which is defined at the nexus of his magnum

opus even though he elsewhere refers to "games" as that which interests him and that which he studies. I find it surprising that philosophers have not spent more time analyzing this inconsistency.

Suits on Play and Games

We get a glimpse of Suits' views on this relationship within his Venn diagram in the "Tricky Triad." The section that is part of the Play circle that does not overlap with game or sport is called "primitive play," and it is play in which "skill is not its essential ingredient." Primitive play "is not concerned primarily with the exercise and enjoyment of skills but with the introduction of new experiences that arise, usually, serendipitously" (Suits, 1988: 2). This is a rather shallow definition compared to the seemingly endless scholarship on play from philosophers as far back as the ancient world. However, in presenting the concept this way, Suits is cutting to the chase, so to speak–being economical with this background content to get to his main point. In doing so, he chooses to pinpoint one important aspect about play when games and sport are not present–novelty. Primitive play is that which seeks newness and stimulation that has not been experienced before.

"The repetition of these (primitive play) experiences may very well result in the development of skills directed toward the recurrence of those experiences," Suits argues, "and such skills may, although they need not, come to be valued for their own sake" (1988: 2). This is when we begin conventionalizing play experiences. Suits argues elsewhere in "Tricky Triad" (1988: 4-5) that some games create new skills that would not have existed otherwise while other games simply place extra constraints around already existing skills. Clearly, skills are a central component of games and the ways that games comprise a separate phenomenon from play. When skills are developed within recurring play experiences, Suits argues, "we are just beginning to move from primitive play to sophisticated play, that is, to games, and perhaps to something else as well" (1988: 2).

"Sophisticated play" is the term Suits uses to refer to the area on his Venn diagram in which play and games but not sport intersect (1988: 7). It is when skills develop as a result of recurring play experiences. And as this happens, the skills begin to become the potential payoff for the experience, whereas it would not be the case for serendipitous, primitive play. Suits' example here is of a baby splashing water in a bathtub. Primitive play is when the baby splashes water and is pleased by the splashing water. That is the payoff. In sophisticated play, the baby would (theoretically) begin to become pleased that she is becoming an accomplished water-splasher. Skill development would be the payoff in sophisticated play.

This description is similar to Roger Caillois' continuum of experiences from *paidia*, or childlike play, to *ludus*, or rule-governed and structured play or games. Caillois claims that *paidia* is "an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety" (2001: 13). These experiences can be characterized by novelty–experiencing that which is new or unusual. When this type of "frolicsome and impulsive exuberance…(with an) anarchic and capricious nature" binds "with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions," then it becomes *ludus* (2001: 13). Much of the language used here is similar to Suits' and gets at a similar idea: the relationships between play experiences and game experiences may be quite continuous. Caillois certainly thinks so. While Suits alludes to this fluidity in "Tricky Triad," he argues that play and games are categorically different yet compatible in a later article (2004). I will argue differently but not oppositionally: first, that games provide a structure for play experiences that considerably dampens the fragility so often experienced in the play world, and second, that game structures provide nuance that offsets the loss of novelty when would-be players return to familiar activities.

Games are activities, Suits argues. As such, they have three necessary and sufficient conditions. First, games have goals. Attempting to achieve a certain state of affairs is a necessary component of a game. This is called the prelusory goal. Rules and means are established to determine how a certain state of affairs is to be achieved. The game goal is to be attained only through use of Suits' second condition, means that are accepted by all competitors, and his third condition, rules that constrain the conditions by which one can achieve the intended state of affairs. However, games are made by and for humans, and so to "play" a game includes one more thing: the right attitude. This is not an attribute of the game activity, but Suits argues that it is necessary for game-playing to occur. Suits argues that one must have the lusory attitude in which the rules and means are undertaken in order to try to achieve the state of affairs just so the activity can occur. In other words, among an innumerable array of attitudes one might have when participating in a game, one of them must be the acceptance of the game's constraints in order to make the activity possible. One must, in essence, accept the conventions to be able to be "playing" the game (Suits, 1990: 34-37).

The (Likely) Normative Origins of Play and Games

In order to understand the overlooked but important relationship between play and games, I need to go back to the anthropological origins of play and games. Suits does this in Kipling-esque fashion, creating "just so" stories as plausible yet crude reconstructions of the origins of particular games (1988: 3-5). Each story Suits tells (and the "just so" stories that other sport philosophers have used to delineate the nature of games (Kretchmar, 1989)) results from one thing: boredom, or the loss of novelty in experiences. After describing the "just so" creation stories of Kick the Can, hockey, and diving, Suits paraphrases Kierkegaard in saying, "Boredom is the mother of play." The symbolism here is appropriate: boredom, the mother, births play, the offspring. The content here is appropriate, too: Suits sees boredom as the origin of play and games. It is this origin that will help us dig deeper into the nature of the relationship between play and games.

To be sure, Kierkegaard does not explicitly say that boredom is the mother of play. Instead, he says that, "Boredom is the root of all evil" (1987: 286). The Danish philosopher's essay, "The Rotation of Crops: A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence," is based on understanding the legacy that boredom leaves. "It is very curious," he explains, "that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion" (1987: 285). Boredom is clearly the mother of something.

The problem for Kierkegaard is what to do about boredom. "All who are bored cry out for change," he says, adding, "In this, I totally agree with them, except that it is a question of acting according to principle" (1987: 291). One remedy Kierkegaard describes by the title of his essay. Many seek the "rotation of crops," or continuously changing the soil, to combat boredom. When bored, many seek "the boundless infinity of change" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 291).

Play experiences often follow this principle. In order to prevent staleness, monotony, or under-stimulation–all experiential enemies of play–we seek new experiences. Novelty is a big part of play, and the world offers us an endless supply of change options to experience novelty as often as we would like. "One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city," Kierkegaard argues. "One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold." This is the rotation of crops that Kierkegaard laments, representing "a fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star" and the "method cancels itself and is the spurious infinity" (1987: 291-92). Play experiences, especially those that are not a game or sport, exist on this "endless journey" to "infinity" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 291-92). For children, the novelty found within what Suits calls "primitive play" experiences (the section of his Venn diagram that includes play but not a game or sport) last longer than they do for adults. Children have a greater capacity to blow bubbles, splash in the water, romp in the mud, or frolic with the dog, for instance, than adults. The latter still engage in these activities but to a much lesser extent. These activities are among the most fragile play experiences for adults, as chores, emails, cell phone apps, or virtually anything else often commandeer one's attention at a moment's notice. Kids grow out of these once-attractive play experiences and adults rarely find them alluring enough for intrinsically motivated participation.

Novelty and Nuance; Fragility and Familiarity

While constantly seeking novel experiences of play (rotating the crops), we often find ourselves bored. If not the mother of all play, boredom is at least the mother of a great deal of play. Suits clearly understood this cause and effect. Indeed, the examples he gives of play in his scholarship–a baby splashing in bath water (1988), a child excavating her pile of mashed potatoes into a system of rivers and lakes (1977), performing music on a trombone (1990), and engaging in a doubles tennis match in one's free time (1977)–are simple, and it is therefore quite easy to see how each of these examples demonstrate what someone might choose to do when boredom arises.

Anthropologically, this also seems to be the case. One gets bored, and one either finds a new way to pass the time (splashing bath water, excavating mashed potatoes into landscapes) or engages in an already established activity that has possible intrinsic value (trombone, tennis). The "just so" stories that writers have attributed to this behavior evolution are plausible because we all experience it at times. We get bored, and we either find a novel stimulus or we return to a well-known stimulus.

And Suits sees a difference between these two ways of allaying boredom. The first–finding new stimuli–is likely to be less enduring. It is often play that is not a game or sport, what Suits calls Primitive Play. It is primitive because anyone is capable of it, because it requires little to no intelligence due to its lack of structure, and because it sometimes leads to more conventional behavior, like games.

This is Kierkegaard's description of the rotation of crops, as he uses it colloquially. The rotation of

crops denotes the continuous changing of the soil in an attempt to always find something new and stimulating. It is, "the boundless infinity of change," that is "vulgar, inartistic" and "based on an illusion" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 291). The illusion is that one can and will always find something new and stimulating when previous stimulation has lost its novelty and, therefore, attraction. Changing the soil is a vacuum, never ending in possibilities and, therefore, also rarely providing the kind of durable, lasting, and meaningful satisfaction that our free time choices can procure.

"Primitive play," Suits argues, is "the introduction of new experiences" (1988: 2). What makes them enjoyable is their newness. But then, by default, what makes them no longer enjoyable is when they are no longer new. Suits takes this argument much further in *The Grasshopper*, as he explains this problem. In this satirical treatment of Aesop's fable of the grasshopper, Suits' main thesis is that the ideal of life is *the playing of games*.

This phrase is important in that in it, Suits rejects play that is not games as the ideal of life and specifically identifies *game-playing* as the ideal. Play that is not games–Suits' Primitive Play, or more likely adult examples such as leisurely playing a musical instrument, traveling for enjoyment, or relaxingly sun-bathing at the beach–fall into the trap of losing their interest after some time. Boredom sets in because nothing is being achieved, whether in a real or lusory way.

Suits' ideal of existence for humanity is, therefore, playing games. In games, something is being achieved, but it is not something instrumental (because in Utopia everyone's needs are always met). Games take playful experiences and mold them into activities that one can return to time and again to experience the problem or challenge anew–can I perform better than I did before, will my competition be strong, etc.? This provides the antidote to the lost luster that is the downfall of play experiences that are not games. As activities with inherent problems or challenges, games renew their novelty each time we open their doors.

Games are conventionalized activities that pave our paths into play. They do this, as I will argue in the following, by providing nuances that act as more durable substitutes for the novelty we so often seek in play. In doing so, they also provide familiarity over time that reduces the fragility that always seems to be lurking in our primitive play experiences. Three principles from Kierkegaard to which Suits alludes–limitation, arbitrariness, and consistency–will help underscore these arguments. A deeper look at these three principles will extend Suits' views and highlight how they better help us understand play and games.

The Principle of Limitation

The problem with primitive play encounters is that we often experience them when there seem to be an infinite amount of options at our fingertips. We lose interest, then, when so many novel possibilities exist. "The method I propose," Kierkegaard argues, "does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops" (1987: 292). As such, he pushes for intensity of experience rather than extensity, not looking for novelty but seeing the same thing in a new way–nuance. Our games are like this. Playing chess again and again is not a novel pattern of behavior. But each game of chess is different. Different players make different moves in response to or protection against different moves and strategies from opponents. This nuances each instantiation of the same activity. And what is needed for this to occur is at first glance antithetical to play and to games–limitation, a characteristic that Kierkegaard refers to as "the sole saving principle in the world" (1987: 292). Limitation is that which forces us to become resourceful, and resourceful people are not boring. Resourceful people are more play-capable than those who are not resourceful. And a resourceful person often becomes such because of limitations.

"Think of our school days," Kierkegaard reminisces, "we were at an age when there was no esthetic consideration in the choosing of our teachers, and therefore they were often very boring–how resourceful we were then" (1987: 292). When bored and limited, children–and adults for that matter–find play in what might normally be considered sterile environments all because of limitations. "What fun we had catching a fly…what delight in cutting a hole in the desk…how entertaining it can be to listen to the monotonous dripping from the roof…what a meticulous observer one becomes" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 292).

All of this invokes the goddess Athena, born of her mother, Mêtis, who imparted to her daughter the gift of resourcefulness. Indeed, the word "mêtis" means multiplicity, deception, the ability to manipulate reality. It has also been translated as "suppleness and malleability (that) give (one who has it) the victory in domains where there are no ready-made rules for success, no established methods, but where each new trial demands the invention of new ploys, the discovery of a way out that is hidden" (Deacy, 2008: 7). Athena describes herself alongside Odysseus as "the two shrewdest minds in the universe…and I famed among gods for my clever schemes" (*Odyssey* XIII: 307-9). This makes her an exceptionally powerful

entity, especially considering the relatively sterile circumstantial environments in which she leads in Homer's epics. Athena effectively conveys the resourcefulness–being able to do a lot when there appears to be such great constraints–so common to the creation, proliferation, and evolution of play and games (Colas, 2016: 51).

Indeed, Kierkegaard's simple justification for the apparent paradox of finding greater freedom or opportunity through limitation is Athenaic–the limitation of one's environment and the imposition of limitations (according to Kierkegaard: the more, the merrier) force one to think more acutely and deeply about the possibilities within one's restricted environment. The diminution of options actually sustains one's focus, especially in those "distractions" that overcome one's boredom.

Athena's spirit awakened the Greek warriors from monotony (a wartime equivalent of boredom) into action despite what had become almost a stalemate after ten years of fighting the Trojans. Knowledge of the wooden Palladium honoring Athena within the walls of Troy motivated the Greeks to create a wooden horse statue as a gift, a plan requiring a great deal of sustained focus. Acceptance of this gift–in essence, acceptance of another honorific symbol of Athena–allowed the Greeks to infiltrate Troy and effectively end the monotonous, ten-year war fought within, for the Greeks, a very limited environment.

Unusually effective, resourceful, or serendipitous behavior often occurs when the would-be players accept the environment's limitations or conventions. The schoolchildren in Kierkegaard's example found great enjoyment in trying to trap a fly or following the cadence of the rain dripping off the roof. These normally shallow experiences gained play force because of the limitations–the children were trying to do them without the teacher noticing that they were distracted. For if their secret distractedness had been disclosed, the children certainly would have received reprimand, and the activity would have been stamped out.

The reason that these childhood distractions remained in Kierkegaard's memory well into his adult life is that they were not necessarily one-off experiences. Indeed, they seemed prominent in his childhood memories. And the principle that underscores all of this is that he and his peers as schoolchildren seemingly created the interest in these otherwise mundane experiences that could have been much different had they chosen them to be so.

Suits appears to build on this when describing the two ways that the "gaming" of play experiences occurs. He introduces the concept of limitation as he begins the long, circuitous chapter in *The Grasshopper* in which he arrives at his definition of game-playing. Indeed, he introduces the chapter with the most obvious belief about games as that they are activities that select inefficient means. In non-game activities–work or technical activity–agents find and employ the most efficient means of completing the tasks so as to maximize profits, minimize time, minimize pain, and the like. Games are different, though, in that they select, employ, and require sub-optimal means to reach a goal.

This is the principle of limitation. Games limit one's means toward reaching a goal. Roughly 700 years after Athena inspired the Greeks toward a strategy within their sterile and limited environment, we find another legendary example of what constrained means produces. When Pheidippides ran from the battle at Marathon back to Athens to send a message of victory in 490 BC, this was not a game. Pheidippides had no better means of navigating the rocky Peloponnesian terrain during the Classical period than by foot. He went as fast as he could, as efficiently as he could. Today, however, marathon races are games in part because there are limitations on how efficiently participants can navigate the 26.2 miles. Driving a car, riding a bike, and any other means of transportation other than ambulation is prohibited because it is too efficient. Running races limit the ways in which their participants can get from the starting line to the finish line.

A sport like tennis, for instance, has many limitations. The ball must be hit over the net, even though it would be much easier to hit a ball to the other side of the court if there was no net, or even if the net was lower. And each player must stay on her own side of the net while the ball is in play. It would be much easier to ensure that the ball bounced twice on one's opponent's side of the net if a player could jump over the net following her shot and physically block her teammate from reaching the ball before its second bounce. That strategy is ruled out, placing one of many limits on tennis players.

The principle of limitation here encourages game-players to change "the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 292) rather than simply changing the soil. A marathon runner or a tennis player does not have to worry about the activity getting stale as each tennis match or marathon is different from the last. The challenge presented by competitors will be different each time. The problem to overcome (fatigue or an under-developed backhand groundstroke) may be different (at least by degree) in

each competition. And a participant may find special interest in navigating the specific limitations of a particularly hilly marathon course or a grass tennis court when one is used to playing on clay. These nuances within the game structures are what keep the participants coming back. They know the overall test that a marathon or tennis match provides, but each match or race presents different nuances within the familiar challenge.

Kierkegaard describes how this changes a person, saying, "The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes" (1987: 292). Someone who jogs regularly to stay healthy, for example, but then begins entering running races will find within the increased limits of official races a particular resourcefulness that one cannot experience without those constraints. The recreational jogger runs whenever he wants, wherever he wants, and makes decisions during each jog regarding his level of fatigue, course, pace, and anything else. Once a jogger has entered a race, he has gone from a play activity (it would at least be playful at times or in certain ways) that is not a game to one that is a game. And the limits that come with the game provide resourcefulness. The runner has the ability to learn about starting positions, course navigation, finding a pacer, strategies of staying ahead of or falling behind fellow competitors, and so many more things that were not available without the limits placed on him by the race. Running official races for a jogger exemplifies Kierkegaard's admonition to "seek relief (from boredom) not through extensity [that is, finding a different activity to do] but through intensity" (1987: 292). It is not rotating the crops when bored but instead changing the soil or the methods of cultivation, for instance. Creating or engaging in games based on play activities provides intensity to the activities–a search within the activity for nuance, differentiation, and, therefore, meaning. Games provide just the right amount of tradition and variation to perpetuate Kierkegaard's farming analogy: "Just as one varies the soil somewhat…so also must one continuously vary oneself, and this is the real secret" (1987: 298).

The Principle of Arbitrariness

So what is the ingredient within games that make their nuance so enticing? Kierkegaard argues, "Arbitrariness is the whole secret" (1987: 299). The experiences that he had in his limited childhood environments could have been otherwise. He continues, "One does not enjoy the immediate object but something else that one arbitrarily introduces" (1987: 299). There is no inherent gratification in carving a hole in one's desk and trapping a fly inside of it. The experience allays boredom because it was created arbitrarily by the children within their limited–and, for Kierkegaard's example, quite sterile–environment.

But arbitrariness is not just the secret for children. Kierkegaard gives another example of a loquacious and annoyingly philosophical acquaintance to whom he was often forced to listen. "On the verge of despair," Kierkegaard narrates, "I suddenly discovered that the man perspired exceptionally much when he spoke. This perspiration now absorbed my attention. I watched how the pearls of perspiration collected on his forehead, then united in a rivulet, slid down his nose, and ended in a quivering globule that remained suspended at the end of his nose" (1987: 299).[1] Boredom had set in, his environment was limited, and he found something arbitrary that gave him a new focus. "From that moment on," Kierkegaard concludes, "everything was changed. I could even have the delight of encouraging him to commence his philosophical instruction just in order to watch the perspiration on his brow and on his nose" (1987: 299).

Continually varying oneself remains important if it is couched in arbitrariness. Suits plays on this anti-boredom characteristic, too, as he constructs his definition of game-playing. "One might ask how (behaviors) can be accounted for," he asks of the seemingly random limitations placed on acceptable means in games. "One answer might be that it is unaccountable, that it is simply arbitrary" (1990: 30).

Kierkegaard explains the principle in this way: "Something accidental is made into the absolute and as such into an object of absolute admiration" (1987: 299-300). This is the precise genesis of games. Something unplanned–or something planned that has unplanned consequences–occurs and is taken as the new rule or way. Something happens by chance or by designed trial, succeeds, and then becomes the target of experience moving forward. Games are created around this type of arbitrariness. Chess, with all of its complexity, possible nuance, and symbolism, shows how a convention might evolve. In chess, players take that which has no inherent attraction–small blocks of shaped wood and a square board–and turn them into targets of experience. And this "is an excellent means of stimulation," Kierkegaard adds (1987: 300).

1 This story that Kierkegaard tells is very similar to one that Suits writes about called "Sweat Bead" in order to differentiate between games and sports (1995: 13).

The human experience has always included running–running from predators, running after prey, running to transfer information, and, probably later, running for enjoyment. So when Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens and immediately collapsed dead upon arrival, the information that he relayed as a messenger upon his death became overshadowed in a sense by this accidental occurrence. He must have run a perfectly exhausting distance, the local Athenians must have thought. And that distance arbitrarily took on an absolute meaning of its own that is still with us today (symbolically, at least). To run a marathon is to accomplish a feat that pronounces one capable of withstanding the forces of exhaustion, and we have decided that 26.2 miles is the right distance[2].

The origins of association football, rugby, and American football may further this point. The British origins of "football" (a ball game played on foot as opposed to the games played on horseback) were originally quite intrinsically valued and really had no rules–mass chaos play that included many people. But rules conventionalized these activities that arbitrarily limited what a player could or could not do. "Football" fields dwindled in size, included physical structures of aim called "goals," and precluded use of the hands and arms to move the ball. Rugby evolved once an early "football" player picked the ball up and began running forward with it. American football, then, serialized each "play," or movement from scrimmage.

Each of these sports has evolved to include voluminous rulebooks codifying virtually every possibility imaginable. And all of this evolved from playful experiences among large groups of people that chose to devote absolute admiration to arbitrariness. Many of the rules and means that are so central to each of these three distinct sports could be otherwise. Suits acknowledges this complexity in games, saying, "The decision to draw an arbitrary line with respect to permissible means need not itself be an arbitrary decision." American football allows four "downs" for a team to try to gain ten yards, whereas Rugby Union includes no limit on "downs."

These differences are arbitrary, but "the decision to be arbitrary may have a purpose, and the purpose may be to play a game." Suits believes that the lines drawn in games are not really arbitrary at all because they have consequences for how and why the games are played the way they are. Association football does not allow use of the hands; rugby allows use of the hands but does not allow forward passing; American football allows use of the hands and does allow forward passing (even though it did not originally). These differences have a bearing on the central goals of the games and most other rules have been put in place to promulgate the central goals of the games. These rules limiting the means are arbitrary in some sense in that they could be otherwise, but they are also not arbitrary because they dictate that the games be played in ways that we want. In that sense, we have devoted absolute admiration to arbitrariness.

The Principle of Consistency

The difference between Kierkegaard's experiences as a child and as an adult has to do with consistency. "The more consistently a person knows how to sustain his arbitrariness, the more amusing the combinations become" (1987: 300). There may be no better dictum for the durability of games. Adults, while much more quickly bored in the presence of novel experiences, become much more adept at consistently finding ways to sustain their once-arbitrary, amusing experiences. This further elucidates the close ways in which Kierkegaard's musings on allaying boredom transfer to Suits' thoughts on the relationship between play and games, for Suits believed that the sustenance of arbitrariness occurred in and through games.

As we devote ourselves absolutely to these conventions, the limitations and arbitrariness that turn play into games provides consistency within our leisure activities. The arbitrary conventional combinations that we create become "more amusing" when they include consistency, Kierkegaard argues (1987: 300). Play activities that we have turned into games become more fun when we can play them over and over again–at home or at school, at a friend's house or at work. The more repeatable the conventional activity is, the more often we can participate in it. Consistency has therefore provided our games and sports with a great deal of intensity because of the ways we have delved into the nuances of them instead of continually seeking new activities. In this sense, games have taken on lives of their own through our "absolute admiration" of the arbitrariness we create within our limited environments, and how we return to these experiences often (1987: 300). They become their own meaningful activities, separated by virtue of the logic we attach to them over time whereby we create new skills or find new uses for existing skills. As such, new subcultures arise as the games grow in consistency, intensity, and, therefore, conventionality.

2 I acknowledge that there is great debate as to the historical origins of the marathon race. Nevertheless, the example still appropriately (I believe) serves to elucidate the principle of arbitrariness.

However, all of this speaks to the fact that sports and games have become popular landing spots for leisure time choices. The conventions we create through games provide us with familiarity over time. We recognize them, we are drawn to them, and we feel comfort in their presence. Kretchmar (2005) calls these deep games in that they speak into our lives as core parts of our identities, just like close friends or relatives do. Deep games are lasting, they have staying power, and they change us in real ways just as we the participants do the same to them, phenomenologically speaking. Deep games–those that we consistently participate in–provide us with possibly the strongest antidote to the inherent fragility in play and the play world. Indeed, while we may easily lose the play spirit in a novel experience because of all the unknowns, deep games provide us with familiar structures that are like well-worn paths into the play world. When we return again and again to our favorite games, our familiarity breeds the play spirit because it provides well-known patterns of behavior with just the right amount of potential nuance to attract and excite us.

However, Kierkegaard and Suits do not want to deny the pleasure, power, and goodness of a different type of game. For while some games stand the test of time and serve our needs for deep, robust, meaning, belonging, and playfulness, other games simply serve to pass the time or show up only serendipitously and have only short durations. These Kretchmar (2005) calls shallow games. Despite their lesser value than deep games, they still add to our lives, albeit in smaller individual ways. And yet one's ability to create, find, and engage in shallow games may be an even more valued part of one's character. Part of the playfulness here is just what appealed to Kierkegaard as a child: finding and creating meaningful experiences based on arbitrariness within limited environments.

Kierkegaard argues that one "always ought to have (one's) eyes open for the accidental, always ought to be ready if something should come up" (1987: 300). This is the person who does a lot with a little when met with unexpected spare time. This is the Greek army presenting a fake gift honoring Athena to the Trojans, thereby overtaking the city. This is creating a sport called marathon running in honor of Pheidippides' journey. This is someone who finds or creates conventions that reveal unexpected interest in otherwise monotonous conditions. This is someone who harnesses and therefore captures boredom as a slave to her erupting creativity. This is consistency of awareness for the arbitrary. One allays boredom by harnessing the "insignificant things (that) can accidentally become... rich material for amusement" (1987: 300). This quality does not have the durability of deep, intensively explored games, but it has its own value. In social, non-sporting situations, this gaming up of play experiences is quite congenial and charming. And it is a start. The wide road of play is littered with games that have fallen by the wayside. Some continue on, conventionalized and re-conventionalized to our liking and to our skills and abilities. Others have their moment in the sun, however brief, before fading away–maybe for eternity and maybe until found by someone else and used in another way.

Conclusion

Suits was on to something. The way in which he began the "Tricky Triad" discussion would have developed a completely new and important line of philosophical inquiry. He was interested in the relationships between play, games and sport. However, the direction of this discussion was hijacked as Meier and Suits quarreled over the relationship between games and sport. The "Tricky Triad" conversation may have never reached the destination that Suits desired.

And it is to this end that I have tried to broaden the discussion of the close experiential relationship between play and games by using Kierkegaard to gain a better understanding of Suits and the relationship between play and games. Games, as conventionalized activities, provide structures for play. Games are activities in which a player can find nuance that provides more durability and meaningfulness than what would become an endless search for the novelty that is so often necessary to produce play experiences outside of game structures. Games are also activities that become familiar to the player, in effect lessening the fragility that is so characteristic of our experiences of play.

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