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## ON JUDGED SPORTS

Thomas Hurka 

*Whereas Bernard Suits argued that judged sports such as diving and figure skating are aesthetic performances rather than games, I argue that they're simultaneously performances and games. Moreover, their two aspects are connected, since their prelusory goal is to dive or skate beautifully and the requirement to do somersaults or triple jumps makes achieving that goal more difficult. This analysis is similar to one given by Scott Kretchmar, but by locating these sports' aesthetic side in their goals rather than in their rules, it better captures the importance of beauty in them.*

KEYWORDS sports; Suits; judged sports; figure skating; diving

In his 1988 article 'Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport', Bernard Suits abandoned a view he'd defended in an earlier article (Suits 1973) and assumed in his book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (1978). In *The Grasshopper* he'd assumed that, whereas there are games such as chess that aren't sports, all sports are games. In 'Tricky Triad' he argued, to the contrary, that some sports, most centrally figure skating, platform diving and gymnastics, aren't games but instead are performances. Whereas a game has a referee, he now argued, these sports have judges and are therefore judged performances. And since what's judged in them are aesthetic qualities such as beauty in a skating programme and elegance in a dive, we can call them aesthetic performances. Suits recognized that these sports are competitive; at the Olympics, they award gold, silver and bronze medals. But while he granted that this makes them contests, he denied that it makes them games. On his view, a skater participating in the Olympic figure skating final is like a pianist participating in a piano competition, and a piano competition isn't a game. The piano competitors produce performances, and their performances are judged for their aesthetic merit, but being judged most meritorious isn't the same as winning a game (Suits 1988).

In making this argument, Suits seems to have assumed a binary view according to which something either simply is a game or simply isn't, so if figure skating isn't just like a paradigmatic game such as chess it isn't a game at all. In response I'll argue that though judged sports have some properties that aren't found in chess and that make them in part aesthetic performances, they have other properties in common with chess and that make them in part games. And there's no reason why they can't have both types of property at once and belong simultaneously in both categories. Moreover, these sports' aesthetic and game properties aren't just independent of each other but are connected, with the aesthetic ones embedded in those that make them games; more specifically, they're embedded in the constitutive goals that help define them as the games they are. Figure skating, diving and the like are Suitsian games with an aesthetically specified goal that as aesthetic can also be judged.

On Suits' well-known definition, a game is an activity governed by a distinctive kind of rule, one that forbids more efficient means to an independently specified or prelusory goal (Suits 1978, 41/54–55/43).<sup>1</sup> But as Klaus V. Meier argued in a reply to 'Tricky Triad' (Meier 1988), judged sports have some rules of just this type. In the 200-m sprint, which was one of Suits' main examples of a game, you're not permitted to start before the other competitors. In a similar way, in Olympic diving you may not dive from a higher tower than your competitors or use a bouncier springboard; the sport's rules again forbid any initial advantage. The rules also, we can add, don't allow you to wear a jet pack on your back, which would enable you to dive higher, or carry lead weights in your hands, which would promote a vertical entry into the water. By restricting you to a bathing suit and your unassisted physical powers they forbid more efficient means to a successful dive. In the ice dance competition, you and your partner must in all but a few moves stay in physical contact with each other, so anything that breaks that contact is forbidden; that too excludes efficient means. And all these sports can force strategic decisions like those in other games. In the men's figure skating final at the 1988 Winter Olympics, Brian Orser led Brian Boitano going into the free skate and was scheduled to skate last. His planned programme included two triple axel jumps, and completing both successfully would ensure him the gold medal. Landing the second would be difficult, however, and he decided to replace it with an easier double axel, thinking that would still be enough to win. In the event he came second, but his choice between a higher risk/higher reward option and a lower risk/lower reward one was just like that of a golfer deciding whether to hit 250 yards over water to a par-five green, giving him a chance at eagle but also making bogey and even double bogey possible.

At the same time, Suits was clearly right that these sports have properties that aren't found in paradigmatic games such as chess and golf and that

lead them to be judged as those games aren't. To approach the relationship between the two types of property, let me begin with a more obvious point.

Even a paradigmatic game can have properties independent of those that make it a game, and players can be attracted to it in part for those properties. A golfer, for example, can like the game in part because of the exercise involved in walking the course for four hours. He could get the same exercise by hiking, and if he prefers golf it must be because of its game properties. Still, part of its appeal to him concerns exercise. People can also like a game because of the social interactions it involves, for example, at a golf, chess or bridge club. And they can be attracted by its aesthetic properties. A golf course is often a beautiful place, an oasis of green in the city, and players can enjoy being in that place. Some courses are famed for their beauty, such as Pebble Beach next to the Pacific Ocean and the Banff Springs course in the Canadian Rockies. Golfers who travel to play them are moved largely by the desire to play in those settings. And a well-struck golf shot has its own aesthetic appeal, when a synchronized sequence of movements results in solid contact in the middle of the clubface; that appeal explains why many golfers enjoy hitting balls on the driving range apart from any desire to improve their game.

These non-game properties are usually secondary to those that make an activity a game, and people attracted to the games usually don't let such properties influence how they play. Sometimes, however, they do. Suits said you're a trifter if, while following the rules of a game, you don't actively seek its goal, namely winning (1978, 45–46/58–59/49–50). But it would be too much to require you always to do this to the maximum extent. A golfer interested in exercise may walk the course even though he knows the resulting fatigue will make him play the last holes less well and shoot a slightly higher score; at Pebble Beach, he may spend less time lining up his putts because he's enjoying the ocean view. Something similar can happen in soccer and hockey. The most effective strategy for winning in these sports may be to play defensively, lining most of your players up in front of your goal and making it very difficult for your opponent to score. But some teams refuse to play this way because it's boring and ugly; think of Brazilian national soccer teams with their commitment to attack and 'the beautiful game'. Sometimes choosing an offensive strategy has ulterior motives, such as the desire to attract more fans and generate more income. But often it's aesthetically driven; a team prefers an attacking style for aesthetic reasons and even though it lowers to some degree their chance of winning.

The aesthetic properties of golf or soccer are usually secondary to those generated by its rules, but there's no reason why aesthetic properties can't be coordinate with game ones and of equal importance. It's arguable that this is precisely the case in judged sports.

This certainly seems true from a spectator's point of view. Someone watching the Olympic figure skating final can enjoy it as a sport or game, with the skaters doing the difficult moves – the jumps, twists and spins – the rules require and making the strategic decisions the rules force on them. But he can also enjoy it just as an aesthetic spectacle, as he would a ballet or other dance performance. Different viewers can emphasize a different one of these responses. For some figure-skating fans, the Olympic competition doesn't differ much in its appeal from the non-competitive exhibition the medal winners put on afterwards; they watch both primarily for their aesthetic qualities. Others look mainly at how difficult the skaters' moves are and how successfully they complete them, and a third group balance the two attitudes roughly equally. They can do this because the sport has both a game and a performance side, with each roughly as important as the other.

The same holds from the skaters' point of view. They want both to abide by the sport's rules by completing the required difficult elements and also to present an aesthetically pleasing performance; hence their interest in, for example, the narrative structure of their programme and its fit with their music. Their sport therefore isn't just a game or just an aesthetic performance; it's a performance with game-like rules or, alternatively, a game in which you try to produce something beautiful. This duality is reflected in the traditional scoring of figure skating, which separates 'technical merit', which is largely a measure of the difficulty a skater attempts, from 'artistic impression', which concerns the more aesthetic qualities of his programme. The skater isn't trying just to be technical or just to be artistic, but to be both of these at once.

This, then, is my first suggestion: that a judged sport can be both a game and a performance because it has both a Suitsian and an aesthetic side, where the two are equally important and the presence of one doesn't preclude the presence of the other. I now want to argue that the two properties aren't just coordinate but are connected. Doing so will involve a slight detour.

In *The Grasshopper*, Suits didn't claim that his definition fits all uses of the English word 'game'. He denied that ring-around-the-rosy is a game (1978, 91–92/90/97–98), and in an article defending his definition rejected the idea that it's either necessary or sufficient for an activity's being a game that it be called one (2005). But he thought a successful definition must overlap at least considerably in its extension with the English word, and he therefore argued that role-playing games such as cowboys and Indians and cops and robbers do count by his lights as games.

His argument was elaborate and ended by introducing the concept of an 'open' game. Whereas a 'closed' game such as chess has an outcome, check-mate, that brings it to an end, open games can in principle go on indefinitely. He argued that cowboys and Indians is an open game in which the prelusory goal is just that the game continue, so what players try to do at each time is

to make a move that will enable the others to make a move that will enable the others to make a move, and so on .... as long as they want to continue playing. And the game's rules forbid more efficient means because they require players to improvise rather than, what would be easier, follow a pre-written script. For Suits, cowboys and Indians was therefore like the activity you and a partner engage in if you try to keep hitting a ping pong ball back and forth across a net as long as you can: your goal is just to keep the activity going despite the obstacles in the way of doing so (Suits 1978, 90–138/89–127/96–135).

This was a characteristically ingenious argument, but I don't think it succeeds. If your goal in the ping pong activity is just to keep the exchange going, what you should do at each time is give your partner the easier possible ball to return, namely a soft one in the middle of the table. If cowboys and Indians were similar, players would likewise do whatever makes it easiest for play to continue. And that would result in very boring games – the ideal might be one where the cowboys and Indians follow each other around a large circle at the same speed, so neither ever catches the other and the game can go on forever. But that's not at all how my childhood friends and I played cowboys and Indians. We wanted interesting things to happen. We wanted there to be creative sneakings-up and surprising ambushes, and in particular we wanted there to be dramatic dyings. When you were shot you didn't just die in whatever way would best enable the game to continue; you threw yourself about and gasped in an artistic way, uttering as you did some memorable last words.

This means that, like judged sports, our cowboys and Indians games had an aesthetic side, but it wasn't just coordinate with their game side, in the way described above. It was more intimately connected. More specifically, the aesthetic side of the game entered into its prelusory goal.

If cowboys and Indians was for us an open game, what we aimed at wasn't just to enable the others to continue, but to enable them to do so in an artistic or creative way, so each move of ours would enable them to do something aesthetically pleasing that enabled us to do something similarly pleasing, and so on. Our goal, in other words, was the continuation of something with aesthetic properties.

I think the same connection is found in judged sports. In response to Maier's argument that these sports have game-like rules such as the one forbidding divers to use a higher tower, Suits asked what, if platform diving is a game, its prelusory goal is – certainly a pertinent question. He considered three alternatives, the first two of which, total submersion in the water and vertical entry into it, he quickly rejected. The third, which he took more seriously, was the entire dive, but here he objected that this would be a very unusual prelusory goal, since it would be the only such goal that's judged or scored. In games as he defined them it's the process of achieving a goal that's evaluated,

not the goal itself; we evaluate a player's skill in reaching checkmate, not the checkmate itself. Unless diving is completely unlike other games in this respect, the entire dive can't be its prelusory goal, and the final candidate for that role also fails (Suits 1989).

But to me this last objection misfires. Imagine that the prelusory goal of diving is, slightly differently, to do an entire dive that's elegant or beautiful, so aesthetic considerations enter into the goal itself. Then the game-like restrictions mentioned above, such as the ban on jetpacks and weights, make achieving the goal more difficult because they make it more difficult to dive beautifully, or with certain aesthetic properties. The same holds for the requirement to do somersaults, twists and so on during the dive, or at least to do them if you're to have a chance of winning. It's not hard to produce something aesthetically pleasing if you do a simple swan dive; it's much harder if you have to tumble and turn on the way down and still, for example, enter the water vertically. We can therefore see competitive divers as making a game out of an aesthetic production. They start out with the goal of diving beautifully and then place unnecessary obstacles in the way of doing so, such as the requirement to somersault and twist, just so they can engage in the activity of diving beautifully while overcoming those obstacles. Their sport has a goal that, distinctively, involves aesthetic considerations, but it then, like other games, restricts the means to that goal so divers are forbidden to take easy ones but must instead use ones that are more challenging.

Something similar holds for figure skating, whose prelusory goal can be an entire beautiful skate. It's not hard to skate elegantly if you do just simple circles around the rink, but much harder if you have to include spirals, axels and salchows. The sport's rules and scoring system therefore forbid you to use the most efficient means to a beautiful skating performance but place unnecessary obstacles in the way, so victory requires skating beautifully while doing several difficult things. We can again imagine skaters starting with the goal of skating elegantly and then adding unnecessary obstacles to it, so more and more skill is required to achieve that goal. They too make a game of an aesthetic production.

If this is right, however – if the prelusory goal of a judged sport is to create something beautiful – then it's not at all inappropriate, as Suits thought, for your entire dive or skate to be judged. This isn't only because here your goal, unlike checkmate or making it to the top of a mountain, is one you can achieve to greater or lesser degrees. It's also because, as aesthetic, it's the kind of thing we do normally judge. We commonly rank paintings, poems and musical performances as more or less beautiful, and it's perfectly natural to do the same with dives and skates. That the goals of other sports aren't judged isn't relevant if the goals in these sports have an aesthetic dimension that makes judging them natural. In fact, we can see the division between technical merit

and artistic impression as precisely fitting Suits' analysis of games, given the distinctive characteristics judged sports have. The technical-merit score measures a competitor's success in overcoming the prescribed obstacles to her prelusory goal, with higher marks for overcoming more difficult ones. The artistic-impression score measures her success in achieving a prelusory goal that, as aesthetic, invites judging. The two scores then reflect the two main components, the participant's attitude aside, of Suits' analysis of paying a game: first the goal that can be understood independently of the game and then the rules that make it the game it is.

My account is in one way similar to that suggested by R. Scott Kretchmar in an earlier response to Suits and Meier, and in another way the reverse of it (Kretchmar 1989). Kretchmar too took judged sports to have both a game and an aesthetic side, but he located the aesthetic aspect differently. He proposed that the prelusory goal of competitive diving is Suits' first alternative, total submersion in the water, and argued that the requirement to dive beautifully is an obstacle placed in the way of that goal, or that makes the process of getting to it more difficult; the sport's aesthetic side then figures in its constitutive rules rather than, as in my account, in its prelusory goal. He illustrated his account with a story about an aboriginal boy who periodically has to escape bears by jumping off a cliff into a river 10 m below. When he's done this enough times that it's become easy and boring, he decides to make it more challenging by adding a requirement to do a full somersault on the way down, and then various twists and other somersaults. When that too has become easy, he asks his father for advice. 'Why don't you try', his father says, 'to make your dives beautiful?' The boy now makes his dives more challenging by holding them to an aesthetic standard and is then able to keep at them for years; the result, Kretchmar said, is a game just like diving, figure skating and gymnastics (1989, 39–42).

Though Kretchmar was right to see an aesthetic side in judged sports, I think he was wrong to place it where he did. He didn't intend his story about the aboriginal boy to mirror these sports' actual histories, but to me it's significant that it doesn't do so. Figure skaters didn't first move from doing single jumps to doubles, triples and then quads and only after that add a requirement to skate beautifully; the aesthetic component was there from the start, and the heightened athletic demands only came later. The same is true of diving and gymnastics. All three sports' historical trajectories better fit an account where a concern with beauty is part of a goal that's always helped define them rather than following from a rule that could have been introduced at any time. Locating the aesthetic requirement in the prelusory goal is also truer to Suits' original analysis of games. For him, a game's prelusory goal was something you can either achieve or fail to achieve, where the game's rules make achieving it more difficult and therefore less likely. That's why he rejected submersion

in the water as the goal of diving, since it's inevitable once a dive has begun (Suits 1989, 2). To accept it Kretchmar had to broaden his conception both of the prelusory goal, which could now be just the end state of the activity, in the sense of what comes last in it, and of the obstacles the game's rules create, which could now concern a process whose outcome is not in doubt. Including beauty within the goal requires no such moves, since you can either succeed or fail at diving or skating beautifully, or at least succeed to a greater or lesser degree; these sports can therefore have standard Suitsian goals. Lastly and most importantly, by making the requirement of beauty just another instance of forbidding efficient means, Kretchmar underplayed the centrality to these sports of their aesthetic side. For him, this requirement created just some specifically aesthetic 'hurdles' in addition to those imposed by the sports' other rules, or posed just further 'gratuitous problems', ones whose being aesthetic is only incidental to their importance (Kretchmar 1989, 38, 39). This suggests that we should value the beauty of a winning dive or skate only or mainly because it reflects a difficult achievement and not because, in itself and apart from that, it's aesthetically pleasing. But that seems false to the attitude both of viewers of these sports, many of whose focus is primarily aesthetic, and of participants, who surely value a beautiful performance, when they produce one, as much for its aesthetic qualities as for its difficulty. It suggests, in the language of these sports' judges, that 'artistic impression' is just another aspect of 'technical merit' rather than a separate and equally important consideration. That it is separate and equally important is best captured if the sports' aesthetic side is part of their prelusory goal rather than just another restriction on the permitted means to it.<sup>2</sup>

Suits was right in his later writings that judged sports like diving and figure skating differ importantly from more standard games such as chess and golf. But he was also right, I've argued, when in *The Grasshopper* he assumed that these sports are games. I've tried to reconcile his two views by showing that judged sports have a distinctively aesthetic prelusory goal, one that invites judging as other such goals don't, while at the same time having the other essential features of games, in particular rules that restrict the permitted means to that goal. People who participate in these sports aim at producing something beautiful, which means they're engaged in a kind of aesthetic performance. But they also accept rules that make achieving their goal more difficult, which is a central characteristic of games. They're therefore performing in a game-like way, or making a game out of creating beauty.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. Page references are first to the 1978 edition, then to the 2005, then to the 2014.
2. In a more recent paper, Kretchmar may seem to come closer to my account when he says participants in judged sports ‘want to dive beautifully, carry out an ice skating routine gracefully, or negotiate a high bar routine with apparently effortless precision’ (2008, 148). But in the surrounding discussion, he still treats these sports’ aesthetic demands as analogous to ‘barriers’ to a destination, that is, as mandated by their constitutive rules rather than figuring in their prelusory goal (147).

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