Playing with Art in Suits’ Utopia

**Abstract**: According to Bernard Suits, people in utopia would spend their time playing games and would not spend any time creating or engaging with artworks. Here, we argue against this claim. We do so by arguing that some games essentially involve aesthetic engagement with artworks. One type of game that seems to do so is dual-natured games, works that are both games and artworks. If utopians were to play such games, then they would be engaging with artworks. However, Rough (2017a) has recently called into question the possibility of dual-natured games. With that in mind, we also offer a second kind of game that serves as a counter-example to Suits: *art-inclusive* games, which involve aesthetic and artistic engagement as part of their playing. After providing some examples of this kind of game, we show that the possibility of such games presents a problem for Suits’ claim that utopians would not engage with artworks. If utopians were to play them, then they would be engaging with artworks. And as there is no good reason to think that utopians would not play such games, we conclude that Suits’ claim about the lack of engagement with art in utopia should be rejected.

**Introduction**

What would people spend their time doing in utopia? Infamously, the eponymous character in Bernard Suits’ *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* claimed that all utopian people would do is play games. This comes at the expense of other human activities, including engaging with and creating art (Suits 2005: 151-2).

In this paper, we focus on the claim that utopians would not engage with and create artworks. Many have rejected Suits’ exclusion of art creation and engagement in utopia, primarily because they question his assertion that the ‘necessary ingredients of art’ – aspiration, frustration, hope, fear, etc. – would not exist therein (e.g. Holowchak 2007). While we have sympathy for such objections, here we take a different tack. Specifically, we argue that, even granting Suits’ contention that utopians would do nothing but play games, their doing so does not preclude engaging with and creating art – in fact, in many cases, proper playing *requires* doing so.

To show this, we present three broad counter-example cases. The first centres on *dual natured games*, works that are both games and artworks. The idea here is that, if utopians would play with dual natured artworks, then they would in fact be engaging with artworks. And as there is no reason to think that utopians would not play them, dual natured games appear to show that Suits’ claim is at least partially wrong: utopians would engage with artworks (though it says nothing about whether they would create art).

However, this case quickly runs into a problem. Recently, Rough (2017a) has argued that dual-natured games are impossible. As such, it is unclear how successful the case is in even partially undermining Suits’ claim.

With that in mind, we offer a second case concerning *art-inclusive games*, games the playing of which essentially involves engaging with art or artworks. After providing an example of this type of game, we demonstrate how their being played in utopia would falsify Suits’ claim about the lack of engagement with art in utopia.

Of course, there remains the other part of Suits’ claim, that utopians would not create art. Targeting this, and building directly off the art-inclusive case, our third and final case concerns *art-production games*, games such that their playing essentially involves creating and engaging with art. The possibility of such games presents us with a choice: either we accept that utopians would not play any of the games we have discussed, or we reject Suits’ claim that utopians would not create and engage with art. We argue that there is good reason to think that utopians would play these games and hence conclude that Suits’ claim should be rejected.

**§1. Suits’ Conception of Games and Utopia**

In this section we outline Suits’ argument for the claim that people in utopia would neither engage with nor produce art. To understand this claim, we first need to understand Suit’s vision of utopia. Suits begins his account of utopia by considering the *ideal of existence,* which he defines as,

that thing or those things whose only justification is that they justify everything else; or, as Aristotle puts it, those things for the sake of which we do other things, but which are not themselves done for the sake of anything else. (Suits 2005: 149)

Utopia, according to Suits, is the place that embodies this ideal – in other words, a ‘state of affairs where people are engaged only in those activities which they value intrinsically” (ibid). Here, all instrumental human activities are unnecessary and have been eliminated. In such a world, according to Suits, there would be no need to engage in any kind of economic activity, as all of the economic problems of humanity have been eliminated (Suits 2005: 150). Nor would the inhabitants have to work to solve interpersonal problems, as these too would have been fully solved by incredible advancements made in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and social science. There is no longer any need to compete for love, status or admiration as these too are in plentiful supply given the elimination of social or psychological problems.

So what kinds of activity *would* the inhabitants of such a world engage in? They have no need to work, no issues with psychological development, no pressing social problems, and no need to compete for other people’s love or attention.

Suits’ answer is that these utopians would spend all their time *playing games*. This is because, per Suits, game playing is the *only* purely non-instrumental activity. Thus game playing is the (only) activity that could give meaning to the lives of utopians. As he puts it,

There does not appear to be anything to do in Utopia, precisely because in Utopia all instrumental activities have been eliminated. There is nothing to strive for precisely because everything has already been achieved. What we need, therefore, is some activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and the activity itself is not itself an instrument for some further end. Games meet this requirement perfectly. For in games we must have obstacles which we can strive to overcome *just so that* we can possess the activity as a whole, namely, playing the game. Game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living (Suits 2005: 154).

We take Suits’ point here to be that the lack of need for any instrumental activity in utopia would leave the utopians with an empty life, unless they can find some non-instrumental activity that provides obstacles that they can overcome.

Games, according to Suits, fit this criterion perfectly. To see why Suits thinks this, we must get clearer on Suits’ account of games. He defines games in the following way:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (Suits 2005: 54-55).

The slightly more ‘portable’ version of the definition is that a game is the ‘the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles’ (ibid). For example, when I play backgammon I have a prelusory goal (get my counters off the board before my opponent does) and I accept constraints on how I can achieve this goal (the rules of backgammon). These constraints make achieving the goal harder than it otherwise would be (I cannot simply place all my counters at the end of the board). And I accept them because they make the game of backgammon possible.

With this definition in hand, we can now see why Suits claims that games could make life in utopia worth living. By definition, games involve the voluntary acceptance of unnecessary obstacles. The instrumental activities we engage in when trying to win a game are inseparable from the non-instrumental value of playing the game itself. For example, suppose Alf is trying to get his backgammon pieces off the board before Nathan, his opponent, in order to win the game. In this case, Alf accepts the rules of backgammon as an obstacle to getting his pieces off the board instrumentally, as a means to allowing the game of backgammon to be played. Without his accepting these rules as an obstacle, he would not be playing the game of backgammon. Moreover, the game of backgammon it is not instrumentally valuable – it is not useful for some other end. Rather, playing the game is *intrinsically* valuable. Games, then, provide us with obstacles we must strive to overcome. And we strive to overcome these obstacles not to achieve some other end, but simply to engage in the intrinsically valuable activity of game playing.

Suits’ analysis of games has become the gold-standard when it comes to understanding the nature of games. That said, it has not been immune to criticism. Many have questioned its scope of application, as well as Suits’ conception of the lusory attitude (see e.g. Bäck 2008, Berman 2013; Ellis 2011; Hurka 2006, 2014; Kreider 2011; Kretchmar 1989, 2008; McBride 1979; Meier 1988, 1989; Myers 2012; Paddick 1979; Schneider and Butcher 1997; Tasiolas 2006; Vossen 2017). Similarly, a number of objections have been raised against Suits’ account of utopia. Thompson (2004), for example, accuses Suits of invoking an incoherent account of utopia, while Holowchak (2007) argues that Suits engages in stipulative and circular reasoning.[[1]](#footnote-1) While we have some sympathy for many of these worries, we will not consider these objections here. Instead, for the sake of this paper, we will simply accept Suits’ definition of games, along with his basic conception of utopia.

**§2. Art in Utopia?**

Assuming a Suitsian version of utopia, one natural question is, what about art? Would utopians create or engage with artwork?

Suits strikingly says ‘no’ – utopians would neither create nor aesthetically engage with artworks. More directly,

Art would not exist [in utopia]. Art has a subject matter which consists in the actions and passions of men: with human aspirations and frustrations, hopes and fears, triumphs and tragedies, with flaws of character, moral dilemmas, joy and sorrow. But it would seem that none of these necessary ingredients of art could exist in utopia (Suits 2005: 152).

In other words, according to Suits, creating works of art requires strong emotions and passions. But, because their every need, want, and desire is either immediately satisfied or, if problematic, treated via super-advanced psychology/social science, Suitsian utopians would never experience these. Consequently, they would never bother to engage with or create art.

Before proceeding, let us also clarify two points about the nature of Suit’s claim. The first is what Suits means by the term art. This is a tricky business, as the only claims that Suits makes about what he means by art are contained in the above quotation. We might think then that understanding Suits’ claim will require us to settle on a definition of art. This is a difficult task, given the extensive debate in the philosophical literature about the nature of art. Should we define art in terms of art institutions (Dickie 1974), the historical situation in which it was produced (Carroll 1993), in terms of aesthetic properties or judgements (Zangwill 1995), or in some other way altogether?

Thankfully, we do not need to settle on this issue in order to evaluate Suits’ argument. For Suits’ argument makes clear what the features of art that would prevent utopians from creating or engaging with it are, according to him: Suits claims that “human aspirations and frustrations, hopes and fears, triumphs and tragedies, with flaws of character, moral dilemmas, joy and sorrow,” are, “necessary ingredients of art” (2005: 152). Utopians would not create or engage with art because, per Suits, these necessary ingredients would be lacking. For our purposes, we are happy to grant Suits’ claim that these are necessary ingredients of art that would be lacking in utopia. We do so not because we agree (or think this is a correct description of the necessary conditions for art) but rather because we intend to show that Suits’ argument fails even if we grant him all his working assumptions.

The second point to clarify is what is meant by engagement. Let us distinguish three types of engagement one might have with a piece of art. The first, most basic form, is simply interacting in some way with an artwork – e.g., picking it up, glancing at it, kicking it, standing in the same room as it, etc. This minimum engagement does not require approaching or thinking of the work as a work of art, nor does it involve any kind of aesthetic or artistic understanding. Consequently, we suspect that Suits would not object to its happening in utopia and hence that it is irrelevant to the current argument.

The same cannot be said for the second, appreciative, type of engagement, which is what an audience member stands in with a work when they consider it as an art work. This form of engagement often involves interpretation, and may include acts of creative imagination, though the engagement does not necessarily result in the creation of a new artwork.

Similarly for the third, performative, form of engagement, which is a performance artist’s engagement with a score, script, or something similar. This also involves interpretation of a work, but this interpretation is leveraged in order to produce a new work of art, an artwork that an audience might then engage with in the first or second manner.

We take it that Suits would claim that neither of the latter forms of engagement occur in utopia. This is because the appreciative engagement essentially involves treating a work as a work of art – something that, according to Suits, would be anathema to utopians – while the latter performative engagement involves creating or producing a new work of art – again, something that Suits says utopians simply would not do. Further, since the third form requires the performer engage with a work in the second manner, the real debate seems to hinge upon appreciative engagement. With that in mind, in the following, when we discuss ‘engaging with art’, we have the second, interpretative form in mind.

Suits’ claim – that there will be no creating or engaging with art in Suits’ utopia – is, we contend, false. In particular, we argue that even if utopians do *nothing* but play games, they will still engage with and create art. This is because there are several types of games the playing of which essentially involves creating or engaging with art (and sometimes both). In this way, these games serve as counter-examples to Suits’ claim.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**§3. Dual-Natured Games**

Our first counter-example case against Suits’ claim centres on *dual-natured games*, works that are both games and artworks. Perhaps the most widely known accepted instances of dual-natured games are video games. According to many contemporary philosophical accounts of video games, they are *games*; for example, Robson & Meskin (2016: 166) say that videogames are ‘ludic’, Patridge (2017: 182) claims that video games, like childhood games of make-believe, are a type of game, and Lopes (2010: 108) asserts that, ‘All video games are games, and can be studied as such’. Similarly, many also hold that video games are *art works*: Smuts (2005), for example, argues that, according to most definitions of art, video games should be categorized as artworks, while Tavinor (2009a: 177) classifies video games as art given the cluster theory approach. Finally, Lopes (2010: 114) notes that video games present ‘narratives and moving images’ in ways that ‘evoke the same kinds of emotional responses as we see in the classic fiction and film genres’, which he takes to evidence that fact that video games are art.

Taken together, these suggest that video games have a kind of dual nature: they are both games and artworks. Of course, not *every* game will be both – according to Rough (2018: 32-3), following Tavinor (2009b: 3) and Juul (2005: 43), video games like *SimCity* and *That Dragon, Cancer* lack goals, so they fail to satisfy Suits’ definition of game. And some may find it absurd to say that video games like *E.T.,*which famously played a significant role in ruining Atari, and *Club Drive*are works of art.[[3]](#footnote-3) But many video games do seem to be both games and works of art. For example, thatgamecompany’s 2012 hit *Journey* is often touted as a paradigmatic example of a video game work of art. Similarly, Jurgensen (2018) makes a strong case that *Braid,* a puzzle platformer designed by Jonathan Blow that centres around the player’s ability to reverse time, “rewinding” events, is both a game and an artwork because it clearly fits the Suitsian account of a game and because it tightly integrates narrative and story elements about regret over past mistakes with gameplay (especially the time-reversal mechanic). So, some video games have a dual nature, in that they are both games and art.

This allows us to run an argument against part of Suits’ claim: consider dual-natured games, like those video games that are both games and art. Proper engagement with these games involves undertaking two actions at the same time – namely, playing a game and engaging with a work of art. So, in playing these dual natured games, utopians will also be engaging with works of art. Therefore, assuming that utopians will play these games (a plausible assumption), then part of Suits’ claim is false.

There are several ways Suits might object to this argument. The most obvious is to claim that *no* games have a dual nature. One way of doing so would be to follow Ebert (2005), who argues that ‘real art’ requires a kind of authorial control that video games cannot support. Consequently, the interactive nature of video games prevents them from ‘moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art’. If Ebert is correct, then no video games are artworks, scuppering our argument. However, there is little reason to buy Ebert’s claim that real art must be non-interactive. The past 20 years have seen an absolute explosion of interactive art, much of which is digital, including Shaw’s *Golden Calf*, Lopes’ *Project X*, Yamakawa’s *Kodama – Mischievous Echoes*, and Schemat’s *Wasser.[[4]](#footnote-4)* To say that these works are not *art* in virtue of the fact that they are interactive and hence remove some of the control over the work’s content from the artist and places it in the hands of the audience looks to be at odds with their general reception in the art community. Further, Ebert’s idea that art requires authorial control seems to stem from how we appreciate/evaluate films and literature. But the features that evidence artistic merit for works in one category need not be the same for works in another (Walton 1970: 338-9). So while a film might only be a work of art provided that the artist was fully in control of its content (a point that we are not entirely convinced of), this is neither here nor there when it comes to a video game’s being (or not being) a work of art.

However, there is a more substantive and worrisome version of this objection. Rough (2017a), using Suits’ framework, offers a trio of arguments designed to show that no work can be both a game and an artwork. Rough’s first argument concerns incompatible constitutive goals. Suppose, for *reductio*, that X is a dual-natured artwork-Game. As a game, X must have a prelusory goal. And, as an artwork, its constitutive goal must be that of engaging with all of its relevant features in order to aesthetically appreciate the work. Among the relevant features of a game are its rules, meaning that the goal of engaging with and appreciating X must be understood as at least partially appealing to the game rules. This entails that the relevant prelusory goal cannot be understood independently of the game itself. But this is problematic because, as Rough notes, on the Suitsian picture that there must be a way of specifying a game’s prelusory goal independently of the game itself, including its rules and lusory means. The upshot is that ‘the prelusory goal is not separable from the lusory means in the way that is required of games’ (Rough 2017a: 15) – in other words, X cannot be both a (Suitsian) game and an artwork.

Rough’s second argument is that there are no inefficient means for artworks. According to Rough, the goal of a work of art is to understand and appreciate it. Further, when it comes to dual-natured games, that understanding must take into account any lusory means used to reach that goal as part of the work. But this means that there cannot be an inefficient way of achieving the goal – rather, there’s only *one* way of doing so. As Rough says,

‘While the prelusory goal of a game could be gotten at in any number of ways, the particular nature of each artwork means that there is only one way of reaching the goal of understanding it … though appreciating that art-work and not something else. No matter how seeming obstructionist the artist makes the rules, obeying them is still part of appreciating that work, and thus the only way of achieving the proper appreciation of the work.’ (2017a: 16).

The third and final argument is that the two relevant, requisite attitudes are incompatible.[[5]](#footnote-5) Specifically, the lusory attitude is not only necessary for proper engagement with a game, but is, given the Suitsian framework, attitudinally *sufficient*: for something to be a game, it is enough that it only be engaged with, with the lusory attitude. However, a lusory attitude is *not* sufficient for properly engaging with an *artwork*-game. Instead, proper engagement with an artwork requires some kind of *aesthetic* or *artistic* attitude. And, as these attitudes are distinct, we’ve an incompatibility: if one attitude is sufficient for proper engagement with an artwork-game, then the other, distinct attitude cannot also be necessary. At best, one is sufficient. Yet if only one is sufficient, then a work can either be a game or an artwork, but not both.

Together, these arguments strongly suggest that *no* works are both games and artworks. In turn, this undercuts our first case against Suits’ claim that utopians would not engage with art while living out their game-playing lives. One might try and rebut Rough’s argument,[[6]](#footnote-6) but we will set this task aside for another day. This is because, even if we grant the point that nothing can be both a game and an artwork, it is still possible to generate counter-examples to Suits’ claim.

**§4. Art-Inclusive Games**

Our second case starts with the idea that games can have *art-parts* – that is, games can incorporate elements that are themselves works of art. These parts might be visual artworks (the backgrounds in *Samorost*, the artwork on player boards in *A Feast for Odin,* the pixel art in *Mega Man X*), sculpture (*Gloomhaven*’s and *Warhammer 40k*’s miniatures[[7]](#footnote-7)), film (e.g. video clips in the *Atmosfear* board games), or music (*Fez*’s soundtrack); regardless of what type of art is in play, what matters is that these artworks are parts of their relevant games.

Of course, most of these art-parts are not essential to their game, in the sense that they play no role in the game-play. But they suggest an interesting possibility. Let us say that *art-inclusive games* are games the playing of which essentially involves engaging with art or artworks that are part of the game. Art-inclusive games appear to offer a counter-example to Suits’ claim about no engagement with art in utopia. By definition, players of art-inclusive games must engage with art – otherwise, they cannot play the game. This means that, if utopians would play these games – a plausible assumption - then, *contra* Suits, utopians would engage with art after all.

Clearly, art-inclusive games are possible. Consider *Dixit*, a card game created by Jean-Louis Roubira and published in 2008. The core of the game is a deck of illustrated cards featuring surreal, dreamlike artwork.[[8]](#footnote-8) Each player is given a set number of cards, which is their hand. They then take turns being the ‘storyteller’, whose role it is to come up with a *theme* – a sentence or phrase that describes one of the cards in their hand. The storyteller informs the other players of the theme, who must then select from their hands a card that they feel suitable fits the theme. The selected cards are all given to the storyteller, who shuffles them, along with their own theme-fitting card. The shuffled cards are then laid face up on the table, and players (except the storyteller) secretly guessing which picture is the storyteller’s. If all or none of the players correctly guess the storyteller’s card, the storyteller scores zero and the players all receive two points. Otherwise, storyteller and the players who guessed correctly get three points each. Finally, non-storyteller players whose cards received votes each score one point per vote received. Everyone then draws a card to replace the ones they played, and the next player takes over the storyteller role. The game ends when a player reaches thirty points; this player is the winner.

As the above rules make clear, playing *Dixit* essentially involves “engaging” with artworks: you simply cannot play the game unless you look at the art on the cards. In this way, *Dixit* is obviously a game with art-parts. But nothing about *Dixit*’s gameplay requires that players engage with the card artwork *as art*. In order words, one can play *Dixit* while simply “engaging” with art in the first sense of engagement. Yet a proper art-inclusive game requires players take up the second, appreciative, form of engagement. So, while a wonderful game, *Dixit* is itself not an art-inclusive game.

Thankfully, we can piggy-back off *Dixit* to generate a genuine art-inclusive game. Consider *Bellum Dixit*, a new game we have “designed”. This game is played with *Dixit*’s deck of illustrated cards (indeed, it borrows rather heavily from *Dixit*). At the beginning of the game, each player is dealt seven cards, which is their hand. They then take turns being the ‘aesthetician’, who’s role it is to come up with an *aesthetic quality* *theme* – a sentence or phrase that describes one of the aesthetic features of the images on one of the cards in their hand. The aesthetician informs the other players of the theme, who must then select from their hands a card that they feel suitable fits the theme. The selected cards are then shuffled together, and dealt face up. Players (except the aesthetician) secretly guess which card is the aesthetician’s. If all or none of the players guess correctly, the aesthetician scores zero and the players all receive two points. Otherwise, the aesthetician and the players who guessed correctly each get three points. Finally, non-aesthetician players whose cards receive votes each score one point per vote received. Everyone then draws a new card, and the next player takes over as aesthetician. The game ends when a player reaches thirty points; this player is the winner.

Obviously, *Bellum Dixit* will not be winning any *Spiel des Jahres* awards for originality in game-design. But this lack of originality should not take away from the game’s most important feature: it is not possible to properly play *Bellum Dixit* without (appreciatively) engaging with the card art as art. In this way, *Bellum Dixit* looks like a genuine art-inclusive game.

Further, we see no reason why *Bellum Dixit* would not be played in Utopia. Having play-tested it, we can confirm that the game is a challenging, fun game, which plays upon the rich aesthetic possibility inherent in the wonderful art of the *Dixit* cards. To that end, we contend that, in light of their playing such games, utopians would engage with art after all.

However, it could be objected that while playing *Bellum Dixit* does require engagement with the cards, it does not involve engaging with the cards *as artworks.* This objection could be supported by appealing to David Best’s distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic. According to Best (1988: 385), it is possible to engage aesthetically with a wide range of phenomena that are not artworks – sunsets, mountain ranges, and birdsong can all be aesthetically appreciated, even though they are not artworks. For this reason, artistic engagement is not reducible to aesthetic engagement. Art forms, rather, are distinctive in being, “characteristically concerned with contemporary moral, social, political and emotional issues” (Best 1988: 385). Of course there are cases of art forms that do not seem to be concerned with conveying such meaning, such as abstract art. However, Best (1988: 386) claims that, “it is intrinsic to the notion of an art form that it can at least *allow for* the possibility of considering issues of social concern.” This distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic seems to allow the Suitsian to accommodate *Bellum Dixit*. This game requires aesthetic engagement with artworks but, it can be claimed, does not require *artistic* engagement. That is, while the game requires engagement with artworks it does not really require players to engage with them *as artworks*. So even if utopians would play *Bellum Dixit,* they would not be properly engaging with artworks while doing so.

One potential avenue of response would be to question whether Best’s distinction between the artistic and the aesthetic really captures what is essential to art. Doing so would require we outline and defend an account of the nature of art, something that we have neither the space nor the inclination to do. Thankfully, we do not need to: for our purposes, we are happy to grant this distinction to the Suitsian. Even so, we can still show that utopians would engage with artworks.

Consider a third game, *Artem Dixit*. *Artem Dixit* plays exactly like *Bellum Dixit*, with one exception: it requires artistic rather than aesthetic engagement. In this way, Artem Dixit would require proper artistic engagement with the artworks on the cards from the players. And note that what exactly this means can simply be determined by whatever view the reader finds most plausible about the nature of artistic engagement. For example, according to Best, this will involve engaging with the cards as works that at least have the potential to comment on social issues. Artistic engagement with these artworks then would require that players attempt to interpret them in a way that addresses social issues; e.g. involving themes of loneliness or the rise of populist politics. When players engage with the artworks in this way, they will be doing so in a manner that would be classed as fully artistic engagement on Best’s account.

There is an apparent problem, however. In utopia, all social problems are solved. So it might seem that utopians would be unable to play *Artem Dixit*, since they are not able to artistically engage with anything, lacking any social issues to comment upon. However, this problem is illusory: that utopians have no social issues in their own society to comment upon does not prevent them from engaging with artworks that comment on issues from other, non-utopian societies. Indeed, given that we are able to engage with artworks from other times and places, there is no reason to think that utopians would be unable to do so.

Suits might respond by claiming that utopians would have no interest in playing games that call for this kind of artistic engagement. Given that they would have no social problems or issues of their own, what would their motivation be to engage with artworks dealing with the social issues of other times? However, this line is unavailable to Suits. For similar claims could be made about *any* games that utopians might play. What would be their motivation for wanting to move wooden pieces around a backgammon board? The answer is not that these activities would be enjoyed for their own sake by utopians. Rather they are enjoyed as part of a game (i.e., of backgammon). Similarly, utopians would not, according to Suits, be motivated to engage with art for its own sake. But that would not prevent them from being motivated to (artistically) engage with art as part of a game. The motivation then is simply to play a game, and (artistic) engagement with artwork is what one does to play *Artem Dixit*.

**§5. Art-Production Games**

The possibility of utopians playing art-inclusive games like *Artem Dixit* shows that Suits’ claim that utopians would not engage with art is false. But nothing said so far tells against the other half of Suits’ claim: utopians might still not *make* any art, even if they will engage with it. This makes it seem like Suits’ claim was at least half correct: while utopians might engage with art and artworks, they will not produce their own art.

However, even this part of Suits’ claim is false. Let us introduce *art-production games*, games the playing of which essentially involves producing as well as artistically engaging with art/artworks. While there are, to the best of our knowledge, no such games currently available for purchase, it is not at all hard to design them.[[9]](#footnote-9) For example, take *Visual Art Challenge*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Set-up for the game involves a collection of sixty colour tiles, each of which display samples of particular colours, and fifty theme tiles, each of which specify a particular aesthetic/artistic quality (e.g., sublime, tragic, dynamic, disturbing, beautiful, etc.). At the beginning of the game, five colour and three theme tiles are randomly selected and dealt out face up, so that all players can see. Play then enters the first, creation phase. During the creation phase, players individually produce works of visual art (i.e., a painting, digital image, photograph, collage, etc.) that incorporates all five colours and possesses the specified aesthetic/artistic properties. After a set amount of time (the exact length of which is up to the players), the creation phase ends and the game then moves into the evaluation phase. At the beginning of this phase, the produced artworks are collected and jointly displayed. As a group, players then spend a set amount of time examining the artwork (the exact length of time is jointly decided upon by the players). After this period is over, players then secretly vote on which work (i) best exemplifies the themes, (ii) makes best use of the specified colours, (iii) least exemplifies the themes, and (iv) makes the worst use of the colours. (Players are not allowed to vote for their own artworks.) Works that receive votes in either of the first two categories count gain one point per vote, while works that receive votes in either of the latter two categories lose one point per vote. After all the votes are tallied, the winner is the player with the highest overall score.

As before, if they would play these games, then, *contra* Suits, utopians would not only artistically engage with, but also *make* art. And, also as before, there is no reason to think that utopians would not play art-production games. Consequently, even Suits’ claim that utopians would not create art turns out to be false.

Suits, adopting Best’s conception of art, might attempt to blunt this case by claiming that utopians would be unable to play art-inclusive games. The idea here is that while they may be able to engage with artworks that are made in societies with social issues, utopians would not be able to create artworks because they have no social issues to comment on. However, this objection is unconvincing. First, there is no reason why art should only comment on *contemporary* social issues rather than on the social issues of other times/places, meaning utopians could simply make art commenting on those issues. Second, Best himself (1988: 386) notes that artworks need not actually comment on social issues, so long as the form the work is an instance of allows for the possibility of doing so. If utopians used art forms that allow for such expression – as they would, in the case of playing *Visual Art Challenge* – then they would be creating artworks even if they themselves were not engaging in social commentary. So this response fails as a defence of Suits’ position against our art-production case. More generally, the existence of such games entails that it is possible for utopians to both engage with and create artworks after all.

**§6. Addressing a lurking objection**

Before concluding, we would like to address a lurking objection. In each instance, we have presented a class of game the playing of which would entail also engaging with, and, in the case of art-producing games, creating artworks. But, to derive a genuine counter-example to Suits’ claim, utopians would need to play these games. This sets-up a straightforward Suitsian response to all three of our cases: accept that such games exist, but claim that utopians would not play them. If this were the case, then Suits’ claim that utopians would neither engage with nor create artworks looks unthreatened.

So, would utopians play instances of the game-types we have identified?

We think that the burden of proof here lies with Suits: he needs to provide some good reason to think that utopians would *not* play such games. And the problem is that there does not seem to be anything about these games that would rule them out from being of interest to utopians. Remember, utopians play games because doing so provides them with a purely non-instrumental activity that is capable of giving their life meaning. The games we have outlined involve purely non-instrumental activity, and so there seems no good reason to claim that utopians would not play such games. In fact, Suits could not appeal to any instrumental reason to explain why utopians would select one game over another; for, if he did, then it would no longer be the case that the utopians were engaging in purely non-instrumental activities. And since this contravenes the very heart of Suits’ argument for why utopians would do nothing but play games, such a response is unavailable to Suits.

One way in which a Suitsian might try to provide a good reason to think that utopians would not play these games is to argue that these games only make sense of a background of art engagement and production. In order to play these games, we need to be competent in a rich range of aesthetic and artistic concepts, to have some ideas about how to evaluate artworks. When the background practices of art production and art criticism disappear, as they would in a utopian society, one might worry that people will no longer possess the relevant skills and second that they would have no interest in developing or utilising such skills. How would people be able to identify aesthetic themes in the absence of an art world to possess such skills? Who is going to be interested in developing the ability to identify aesthetic themes in an artwork in the absence of an art world? Who would want to learn how to produce aesthetic themes in artworks in a society that does not engage with artwork? If we think that these can skills only exist against a background of artistic practices then we may have good reason to think that utopians would not play such games.

However, this response overlooks the fact that many games we have today are the relics of activities that developed against background conditions that no longer exist. While these background conditions may be necessary for the creation of such skills, these skills can continue to be developed when these conditions disappear. Take archery for example. The skills involved in archery developed under conditions in which being skilled in the use of a bow and arrow was important for killing enemies and hunting animals. In many modern societies being skilled in the use of a bow and arrow is no longer particularly useful for hunting animals or killing the enemy. It is far more effective to be skilled in the use of an automatic rifle or a fighter plane. However, the sport of archery continues to develop these skills even though the background conditions in which they originally developed have disappeared. These skills then are no longer instrumentally useful but have become a purely non-instrumental activity. In the same way, the fact that the background conditions that developed the skills of aesthetic production and criticism would not exist in utopia gives us no reason to think that people would not pursue these skills as a purely non-instrumental activity. Moreover, the fact that these skills would be transformed into purely non-instrumental activity is exactly what would make these skills the kinds of skills that utopians would be interested in pursuing.

**§7. Conclusions**

Let us review. We have argued against Suits’ claim that people in utopia would neither create nor engage with artworks. To do so, we presented three counter-example cases. The first concerned dual-natured games, which are both games and artworks. These present an initial case against the part of Suits’ claim that utopians would not engage with artworks, as if they were to play such games they would be engaging with artworks. However, Rough’s arguments suggest that dual natured games might be impossible. This led to our second case, involving art-inclusive games. These games are such that the playing of them essentially involves engaging with art that are part of the game as art. Developing an example of such a game, we argued that such games undermine Suits’ claim that utopians would not engage with art. Yet this case said nothing against the other part of Suits’ claim, that utopians would not create art. To handle this point, we developed our third case, concerning art-production games. Working through the example of *Visual Art Challenge*, we claim that these games falsify Suits’ claim that Suitsian utopians would neither engage with nor create artworks.

While our aim in this paper has been to argue against Suits’ claim that there would be no art in utopia, we would like to point out two further implications of our discussion. First, our discussion shows that there may be interesting connections between art and games that are worthy of philosophical investigation (even if we accept the controversial claim that nothing can be both a game and an artwork). Discussions about the aesthetic status of video games should bear this point in mind. Future work in this area could explore other possible connections between games and art that are not restricted to the debate about whether something can be both a game and an artwork.

The other implication of our discussion cuts to the heart of Suits’ conception of utopia. As we noted in the beginning of the paper, Suits claimed that utopians would *only* play games, doing so at the expense of numerous other human activities. However, it is possible to generalize our arguments to cover these other activities. Specifically, for every human activity x that Suits claims utopians would not perform/engage in, we can introduce a new game type, that of an *x-inclusive game*, such that the playing of which essentially involve performing activity *x* *as part of the game*. In this way, such activities would still exist/be performed by utopians, though only instrumentally, as part of the game they are parts of. In this way, given sufficiently creative game designers, Suits’ utopia would not necessarily look all that different from the everyday world; the only difference is that, when we perform an activity for an instrumental reason, utopians would do the exact same things simply as part of a game.

**References**

Bäck, A. 2008. “The Paper World of Bernard Suits.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 35 (2): 156–174.

Berman, M. N. 2013. “Sprints, Sports and Suits.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 40 (1): 163–176.

Best, D. 1988 [1978]. The aesthetic in sport. In W.J. Morgan and Klaus V. Meier (eds.) *Philosophic inquiry in sport* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics: pp.477-493. Originally published in D. Best (1978) *Philosophy and Human Movement* London: Allen & Unwin.

Carroll, Noel. 1993. Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51(3): 313–26.

Dickie, G. 1974, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ebert, R. (2005). Why did the chicken cross genders?. Movie Answer Man, November 27, 2005, [www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders](http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders) (accessed 23 May 2018)

Ellis, J. 2011. “On the Concept of a Game.” *Philosophical Investigations* 34 (4): 381–392.

Holowchak, M. (2007). Games as Pastimes in Suits's Utopia: Meaningful Living and the "Metaphysics of Leisure". Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 34 (1): 88-96.

Hurka, T. 2006. “Games and the Good I.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80: 217–235.

Hurka, T. 2014. “Introduction.” In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, by B. Suits, ix–xxiii. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Jurgensen, Z. (2018). Appreciating Videogames. In *The Aesthetics of Videogames*, eds. Grant Tavinor and Jon Robson. Routledge, pp. 60-77.

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-Real Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press.

Kreider, A. J. 2011. “Game-Playing Without Rule-Following.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38 (1): 55–73.

Kretchmar, R. S. 1989. “On Beautiful Games.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 16 (1): 34–43.

Kretchmar, R. S. 2006. “The Intelligibility of Suits’ Utopia: The View From Anthropological Philosophy.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33 (1): 67–77.

Kretchmar, S. 2008. “Gaming Up Life: Considerations for Game Expansions.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 35 (2): 142–155.

Kwastek, K. (2013). *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*. MIT Press.

Lopes, D. M. (2010). *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. London: Routledge.

McBride, F. 1979. “A Critique of Mr. Suits’ Definition of Game Playing.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 6 (1): 59–65.

Meier, K. 1988. “Triad Trickery: Playing with Sport and Games.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1): 11–30.

Meier, K. 1989. “Performance Prestidigitation.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 16 (1): 13–33.

Myers, D. 2012. “Game as Paradox: A Rebuttal of Suits.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 39 (1): 155–168.

Paddick, R. 1979. “Review Essay: *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 6 (1): 73–78.

Patridge, S. (2017). Video games and imaginative identification. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75 (2): 181-4.

Ridge, M. (2018). The Compatibility of Games and Artworks. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games*, *1*(1).

Robson, Jon, and Meskin, Aaron. (2016). Video games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2): 165-77.

Rough, Brock. (2017a). The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games.* DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jpg.2736

* (2017b). Response to Michael Ridge. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games*, *1*(1).
* *(2018)*. Videogames as neither video nor games: a negative ontology. In *The Aesthetics of Videogames*, eds. Grant Tavinor and Jon Robson. Routledge.

Schneider, A. J., and R. B. Butcher. 1997. “Pre-lusory Goals for Games: A Gambit Declined.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 24 (1): 38–46.

Smuts, Aaron. (2005). Are Video Games Art? *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2.

Suits, Bernard (1978; 2005). *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Broadview Press.

Tasioulas, J. 2006. “Games and the Good II.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80: 237–264.

Tavinor, Grant. (2009a). *The Art of Videogames*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

* (2009b). The definition of videogames revisited. Oslo: The philosophy of computer games conference.

Thompson, K. (2004). Sport and Utopia. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *31*(1), 60-63.

Vossen, D. P. 2016. “Utopia is Intelligible and Game-Playing is What Makes Utopia Intelligible.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43 (2): 251–265.

* 2017. The paradoxes of Utopian game-playing. Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 44 (3):315-328.

Walton, K. (1970). Categories of Art. *The Philosophical Review* 79 (3): 334-67.

Zangwill, Nick. (1995) Groundrules in the Philosophy of Art. *Philosophy*, 70: 533–544.

1. See also Kretchmar (2006) and Vossen (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One might object that Suits’ argument seems to ignore formal art, which does not consist in the ‘actions and passions of men’ (Suits 2005: 152), instead dealing purely with form, shape, and design. However, Suits anticipates this objection, replying that form and content are not as separable as this objection suggests. While we are not entirely convinced by this response, for the purposes of this paper, we are happy to grant Suits this point and set formal art aside. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though of course some might say that they could instead be viewed as very bad artworks. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Lopes (2010) and Kwastek (2013, esp. Chapter 5) for further discussion of these and other interactive artworks. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hence this argument serves both as an objection to our claim that some video games are both games and artworks and that proper engagement said video games involves both playing a game and engaging with a work of art at the same time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ridge (2017) attempts to rebut Rough’s argument, but see Rough (2017b) for a rejoinder. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the preamble to the 2014 annual financial report for Games Workshop PLC, Tom Kirby, at the time the company’s CEO, used the phrase ‘the small, jewel like objects of magic and wonder we call Citadel miniatures’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The game was once introduced to one of the Authors as ‘the game of disturbing images’, which is an apt description. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A potential case here is charades: if the acting/miming involved counts as performance art – admittedly, a big “if” – then charades is an art-producing game. And even if charades itself is not, it would not be difficult to design a variant incorporating additional rules to make the game essentially involve properly creating and engaging with performance artworks-qua-artworks. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Authors have not play-tested this game, but are confident that it is in fact playable and (potentially) quite enjoyable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)