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## 'The Alexandrian Condition': Suits on Boredom, Death, and Utopian Games

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### KEYWORDS▶▶

Bernard Suits; philosophy of games; utopia; leisure studies; utopianism; existentialism

### Introduction

It is a commonplace that once a scientist or philosopher after great effort solves a major problem he is very let down, and far from rejoicing in the possession of his solution or discovery, he cannot wait to be engaged once more in the quest. Success is something to shoot at, not live with... We might call this state of affairs the Alexandrian condition of man, after Alexander the Great. When there are no more worlds to conquer we are filled not with satisfaction but despair (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 189).

Bernard Suits posits that the utopians described in his utopian vision—given at the end of *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* and elsewhere—would experience the 'Alexandrian condition', and so find life in a materially superabundant post-instrumental culture to be necessarily existentially empty. This is because Suits is committed to the following logical and anthropological premise about the nature of post-instrumental existence: "when there are no more worlds to conquer we are filled not with satisfaction but despair" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 189). With no real obstacles to overcome—no more frontiers to push back or push against—Suits predicts that utopians trapped in a state of material plenitude would "die—or go mad—from boredom" (Suits 1984b, p. 8). The 'crisis of leisure' represented by this Alexandrian

condition motivates Suits' overall conclusion that games are a necessary element of utopian life; that only "game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 189) and without them utopians would self-destruct. Games function here to alleviate the logically inevitable existential boredom of utopia by giving utopians something meaningful to do, thereby pre-empting their self-destruction.

I argue that this apparently exclusive choice between Suits' utopia of gameplay and death by suicide is a false dilemma, one which obscures a 'third way' of positive boredom. Further, I offer a deeper reading of the internal logic of Suits' utopian vision, identifying two different temporal phases of his utopia. At time  $U_1$ , just after the founding of Suits' techno-Cockayne, the Alexandrian condition affects 'freshmen' utopians by producing a state of existential meaninglessness and thereby conceivably motivating utopian suicide. At time  $U_2$ , however, sufficient time will have passed for the surviving 'sophomore' utopians to adopt marvellous, meaning-generative utopian games as a tool for defeating the Alexandrian condition and thus realizing Suits' 'ideal of existence' in a utopia of gameplay.

### **1. The Dilemma of Gameplay or Suicide in Suits' Utopia**

Suits asserts that if and when a techno-Cockayne of computer-enabled limitless material abundance is established, new utopians would initially suffer an extreme existential crisis arising from an inversion of their previous, instrumentally-oriented, values: despondency, depression, and even suicide are all live possibilities in his utopia (Suits 1984b, p. 8). Utopians

would thus need to be offered “occupational methadone” in the form of allowing them to act out their former jobs, “to mitigate the withdrawal effects of too abrupt a deprivation of the opiate their work had always provided” (Suits 19--c, p. 94), until they are made ready for more advanced forms of amusement.

I refer to play-working utopians (those using occupational methadone) as playing *games-by-default*, so called only because *any* activity would be considered a game by Suits’ definition as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 43) in the complete absence of instrumentally-compelled activity (i.e., every obstacle encountered in utopia, including work simulations, would be unnecessary, and voluntarily chosen). I contrast these with *games-by-design*, the utopian games specifically intended to fully and meaningfully engage their players by providing optimized opportunities for them to realize their capacities (Yorke 2017, 2018), those that Suits refers to as the “sports and games unthought of today... that will require for their exploitation—that is, for their mastery and enjoyment—as much energy as is expended today in serving the institutions of scarcity” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 194). These games constitute ‘scarcity machines’ in themselves: i.e., they have limitations of means built into them by definition, via their rulesets, which combat the potentially deleterious effects of superabundance (Suits 19--c, p. 111), and therefore can give meaning to utopian lives.

I offer a reading of Suits that deflates an apparent contradiction between the two versions of ‘utopia’ that Suits seems committed to defending: the settled, harmonious utopia of gameplay, and the existentially bleak, suicide-inspiring utopia of *ennui*. There is a simple but

meaningful distinction to be made between psychically disturbed freshmen utopians at time  $U_1$ , in the unstable proto-utopia immediately after the techno-Cockaygne obtains, and psychically perfected (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 183) sophomore utopians at  $U_2$ , in the stable utopia a sufficiently long period of time after the techno-Cockaygne obtains (see Table 1, below). If this distinction stands, then Suits avoids contradiction on this front, for he is implicitly discussing two different types of utopians—happy and unhappy—both cohabiting one and the same utopia, but at different times. However, this does not address the larger question of why Suits would think humans entering into a culture of plenitude would immediately contemplate self-annihilation. To explain that apparent leap in logic, we need to discuss the background of leisure studies more generally.

POINT IN HUMAN HISTORY	KINDS OF GAMES THAT ARE PLAYED
Present day	Set of known games
Time $U_1$ (immediately after techno-Cockaygne obtains, an unstable proto-utopia)	Set of known games + set of former work activities replayed as games + set of unknown games
Time $U_2$ (a sufficient period after the techno-Cockaygne obtains, a stable utopia)	Set of unknown games

*Table 1: Interpretation of Suits' implicit taxonomy of utopian games*

## 2. The Crisis of Leisure

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 'leisure class' became concretized as a subject of sociological study in the work of Thorstein Veblen, who coined the familiar concepts of 'conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous leisure', recognizing these as distinctive hallmarks in the lifestyles of the elite (Veblen 2007 [1899]). Later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leisure became a broader cultural issue as the wide-scale 'technological unemployment' presaged in the previous century came to provide the working classes with greater access to leisure opportunities than they were hitherto accustomed. This phenomenon became known as the 'problem of leisure', popularized in the work of John Maynard Keynes:

The economic problem, the struggle for subsistence, always has been hitherto the primary, most pressing problem of the human race... Thus we have been expressly evolved by nature—with all our impulses and deepest instincts—for the purpose of solving the economic problem. If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose... must we not expect a general 'nervous breakdown'?... for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him (Keynes 2010 [1930], "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", pp. 327-328).

The cultural upshot of technological unemployment is less hyperbolically parsed by an anonymous columnist for *Nature*: "As the machine lessens the volume of toil required from men and women, our social organization must be adapted to... a corresponding increase in the hours of leisure" (Anonymous 1937, p. 941). The problem of leisure is the first element that Suits selects for magnification in his utopia: by formulating a utopia wherein the rate of technological unemployment has reached 100%, he magnifies it into what I call a *crisis of leisure*—a culture shock caused by a sudden expansion of leisure time so great that, for many

utopians, death will (somehow) seem preferable to continued existence.<sup>1</sup> This is one aspect of Suits' Alexandrian condition.

There is a profitable comparison which can be drawn between the crisis of leisure and the phenomenon of *retirement*. For some, retirement is a boon, a chance to tackle important projects of self-realization, and for others (without such projects, or with health or money worries) it is a curse, where boredom and a sense of meaninglessness pervade all activities. Indeed, some individuals who identify too fully with their work lives do not survive their own retirements. Similarly, in the techno-Cockayne, the utopian population is retired *en masse* at  $U_1$ , and "those who are able to learn and enjoy our games survive as happy Utopians... But those who cannot must... die out forever" (Suits 1984b, p. 24).

Some utopians, in other words, are *not* expected to survive the transition from  $U_1$  to  $U_2$ . Suits clearly believes that without the adoption of meaningful gameplay, at least some inhabitants of his techno-Cockayne would simply waste away or kill themselves. He anticipates, in other words, mass suicide and perhaps other potential forms of societal upheaval that would threaten his ideal world (such as rebellion), as soon as it was established.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he predicts that there may even be a counter-utopian force of 'ludic luddites' who would struggle toward "the elimination—or at least a massive withholding of—labour-saving devices" (Suits 1984b, p. 20) to prevent the occurrence of  $U_1$ , or to reverse  $U_2$  entirely, "in order to escape the dreariness and despair of utopian gamerooms" (Suits 1984b, p. 21). To better understand the seemingly bizarre motivation of Suits' utopians, we must consider the other horn of his Alexandrian condition: the phenomenon of *existential boredom*.

### 3. Existential Boredom

Suits magnifies boredom from a condition we occasionally experience to a state that utopians would indefinitely endure. Boredom, writ large, would be the baseline condition of the denizens of Suits' techno-Cockayne, as robotic servants would materially provision both their essential needs and excessive desires. Suits reminds us that in his utopia, "there are so many goods being produced so abundantly that even the most acquisitive cravings... are instantly satisfied... yachts, diamonds, racing cars, symphonic performances, mansions, and trips around the world are as easily plucked from the environment as breadfruit is in Tahiti" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 183). Due to this same thought-experimental wish-fulfilling technology, immortality for humans appears to be conceptually possible—at the very least, living forever is a desire that one *could* conceivably have and which the machinery *might* mysteriously grant (if physics does indeed go on holiday in Suits' utopia, as it seems to; he himself is silent on whether or not immortality is possible and whether his utopians are truly omnipotent or omniscient)<sup>3</sup>—thus the scale of the problem is potentially magnified.

Humanity's condition of universal, meaningless, and boring utopian retirement could conceivably last indefinitely. This extreme case raises the most doubt as to whether or not "wonderful games" on their own would be enough to dispel Suits' predicted utopian *malaise* (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 194).<sup>4</sup> For it is not at all clear whether games can actually function in the role that Suits posits for them, as inexhaustible generators of existential meaning and defeaters of boredom capable of transforming freshmen utopians into sophomore utopians, or whether

he has estimated their value out of all proportion.<sup>5</sup> With this projected homogeneity of utopian luscious experience, we might legitimately worry, with Shelly Kagan, that “game playing is not a rich enough diet to make life in Utopia worth living” (Kagan 2009, p. 393).

However, by adopting a more nuanced view of boredom than Suits offers, the existential crisis it is thought to motivate appears far less plausible. In Lars Svendsen’s *Philosophy of Boredom*, we find his description of Martin Doehlemann’s typology of boredom (Svendsen 2008, pp. 41-42) which covers four separate species, one of which—‘existential boredom’—overlaps with Suits’ utopian schema, “where the soul is without content and the world is neutral” (Svendsen 2008, p. 42). Another, ‘boredom of satiety’, roughly translates to being tired of getting what you want, and therefore is also possibly descriptive of life under conditions of the techno-Cockaygne. Suits interchangeably conflates these two senses of the term, though Doehlemann holds them to be phenomenologically distinct. ‘Situative boredom’ is transitory and so less worrisome—it is tokened by the feeling of being stuck on a train when one would rather be elsewhere—and is easily defeated by changing one’s contingent location or activity. Finally, ‘creative boredom’ can actually have positive outcomes (despite being unpleasant to experience) in that it compels its subjects to engage in novel strategies and techniques for overcoming it. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Suits suggests “*boredom is the mother of play*” (Suits 1988a, p. 5). None of these varieties of boredom appear to logically require the people suffering from them to contemplate or commit the act of suicide; but neither do any of them offer the possibility of reframing the experience of boredom into something experienced as good in itself (as opposed to being merely instrumental in producing desirable outcomes). That is to say, none of the items in Doehlemann’s typology allow for the

possibility of experiencing ‘positive boredom’: say, tranquillity as opposed to restlessness; acceptance, as opposed to dissatisfaction.

An analogue to the positive boredom I propose as an addition to Doehlemann’s typology may appear in Suits’ schema as the possibility of achieving ‘nirvana’ (Suits 19--c, p. 45). Here too, the “soul is without content and the world is neutral” (Svendsen 2008, p. 42), though the result is not distress, but peaceful acceptance. Such a state serves as anodyne for both worries surrounding death, and also the odd dissatisfaction that Suits predicts would occur to humans upon attaining a utopia of material superabundance. There is a certain peaceful, contented attitude towards existence that is presumably possible, and it doesn’t require the agonistic mechanics of competitive gaming to achieve. Call this the ‘third way’ of experiencing positive boredom. But on Suitsian grounds, it should still be argued that it is active gameplay, and not a passive state of tranquility, that best expresses the ideal of human existence—for games constitute meaning-generative life projects in a manner that merely experiencing a state of positive boredom (or, for that matter, taking an anti-boredom pill or having a surgical boredom-ectomy) cannot.

#### **4. Games as Meaning-Generative Life Projects**

Suits proposes that life projects are a meaning-generative technology, and negatively caricatures death as the interrupter of these life projects (Suits 19--c, p. 43). He considers various possible strategies for beating death (*qua* interrupter of projects), the most promising

of which is by viewing life as a timed game wherein the timer is hidden from all players, in the fashion of musical chairs. Once one has *achieved* something—like finding a seat in musical chairs—it can no longer be interrupted, as the achievement has reached a state of completion by the moment the timer has sounded<sup>6</sup> (Suits 19--c, p. 46). If my life's purpose is to publish a book, for example, and if that book has been published, then that achievement is in a certain sense death-proof, though my mortal body may not be. He also argues that achieving certain mental states, such as nirvana, may defeat interruption by death, in the sense that static states of consciousness are not interruptible in the manner that physical processes or progressions of mental states are (Suits 19--c, p. 45). Finally, he argues that viewing life as a timed game is a way to take *agency* over its termination, for "if a game is a thing which necessarily ends, then by intending to play... I would necessarily intend it to end" (Suits 19--b, p. 183). By bringing our intentions and expectations in line with the occurrence of death, accepting it as a necessary condition of the game of life, "if I play the game to its end, then—win, lose, or draw—death is no interruption" (Suits 19--b, p. 187). So, for Suits, life projects can be games, and in fact a life could be *nothing but a game*, and that game could still be meaningful. This theme is carried over from his earliest published articles (Suits 1967), and has been revived by recent commentators, notably Avery Kolers (Kolers 2015, 2018).

However, this reveals a potential theoretical inconsistency in Suits' schema. For if immortality is a live option in his techno-Cockayne (and if we take his word that utopian supercomputers really *can* deliver on any desire utopians can conceivably have, then we have good reason to believe that immortality *is* a deliverable good), then death is *not* a necessary condition of utopian life, and therefore death-*qua*-interrupter of projects *cannot* be defeated

by viewing life as a timed game: the timer never sounds. In other words, in utopia we cannot lean on mortality as a natural endpoint for our game-lives, to provide them with structure and meaning, which leaves Suits open to Bernard Williams' objection that "immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless... death gives the meaning to life" (Williams 1973, p. 82). For even though we might view death as being trivially 'defeated' by the invention of immortality, the question of existential meaning for human lives under conditions of immortality remains.<sup>7</sup>

As a possible defence against concerns such as Williams', we might raise Suits' own example of 'open games'—"games which have no inherent goal whose achievement ends the game" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 143)—which nonetheless seem to function to meaningfully structure human experience. Open games might be invoked as a means by which a meaningful existence under conditions of immortality could be made possible (though Suits himself does not make this move). Kolers employs precisely this strategy when he identifies the 'best life' as "a nested, open, role-playing game where the life's quality as a game partly depends on there being no more people than players" (Kolers 2015, p. 727). He calls this game 'Individual Life', and identifies at least part of what makes it existentially meaningful is that it is nested within a larger game—involving all other actual, nascent, and potential players—entitled 'Fate of Humankind' (Kolers 2015, p. 743). His schema neatly moves the focus away from placing the intelligibility of one's life in the factual certainty of one's death; for if one is sufficiently invested in contributing moves to the Fate of Humankind game, the issue of whether one is a mortal or immortal entity is entirely beside the point. As Kolers states, "our particular achievements have value because of their contribution to humankind as a whole, and the Fate of Humankind

matters because it enables the particular achievements of individuals and groups” (Kolers 2015, p. 743).<sup>8</sup> Thus our individual contributions stand, whether we ultimately live or die.

Games of make-believe with no win conditions, but with the lusory goal of continuing the activity for as long as possible, *would* seem to qualify as meaningful activities which require no end-point; as would simple cooperative games in which players succeed or fail as a group, no scores are kept, and iterations can be rapidly effected if desired (such as a group trying to keep a ball off the ground, or a tennis rally going, for as long as possible). Moreover, such games seem ideally suited to utopian entertainment, since “open games appear to be essentially co-operative enterprises” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 149) and thus are a better fit with Suits’s claim that “the culture of utopia will be based on plenitude” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 194).<sup>9</sup>

Let us recall that Suits’ chief existential concern arises from his utopians being bored, from having ‘nothing they *must* do’.<sup>10</sup> But even in the absence of instrumental concerns, there is always a host of ‘things that *can* be done’. Those things are games, for Suits: but none of them on their own would be *guaranteed* to stave off boredom for all utopians—this is only logically necessary of the *set of all utopian games*. The defeat of boredom is their holistic purpose. But if utopian life is nothing more than “in fact nothing but a series—indeed, a network—of interlocking games” (Suits 1984b, p. 19), then Suits can reasonably expect that those games would be imbued with the same degree of excitement and serious intensity, and thus meaning, as in our non-lusory lives in the present—which defeats the specter of utopian suicide.

## 5. Conclusion

I have identified two main components of the Alexandrian condition in Suits' utopia: the crisis of leisure, and existential boredom. In introducing a novel terminology which distinguishes  $U_1$  (freshmen) from  $U_2$  (sophomore) utopians in Suits' schema, I deflate the utopian dilemma of gameplay or suicide. Suicide is only a concern for  $U_1$  utopians— $U_2$  utopians are those who survive the transition from the unstable proto-utopia of  $U_1$  to a stable utopia of  $U_2$ ; from the 'occupational methadone' of games-by-default to the 'wonderful' games-by-design that are characteristic of utopian gameplay. The crisis of leisure is easy to overcome for  $U_2$  utopians, who are able to identify meaning-generative life projects in the utopian games they play. And by allowing for the theoretical possibility of positive boredom in addition to meaningful gameplay, the threat of existential boredom in Suits' utopia is doubly vitiated.

Suits writes that "Alexander the Great... had run out of worlds to conquer by impetuously conquering the only world there was, [but] he *could* have given it all back and started over again, just as one divides up the chess pieces equally after each game in order to play another game" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 192). The Alexandrian condition is defeated in Suits' utopia by precisely this method. Utopians continuously reset their gameboards, and thereby overcome the spectres of existential boredom and the crisis of leisure, to arrive at Suits' ideal of existence: a flourishing life of meaningful gameplay.

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<sup>1</sup> Suits actually magnifies *all* of these contemporary trends in his utopia: (1) his utopians have the fewest possible working hours per week [0 hours]; (2) live the longest possible lifespans [they are in perfect health, and conceivably have access to life-extending technologies]; (3) have the greatest possible percentage of leisure time available to them [100%]; and (4) have access to limitless recreational technologies, including utopian "games so subtle, complex, and challenging that their inventors will be seen as the ludic Einsteins of the future" (Suits 1984b, p. 24).

<sup>2</sup> This partially motivates the *duty to design*, Suits' exhortation that "It behoves us... to begin the immense work of devising these wonderful games now, for if we solve all of our problems of scarcity very soon, we may very well find ourselves with nothing to do when Utopia arrives" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 194). For if we fail in this duty, the projected consequence for Suits is the annihilation of his utopia as soon as it obtains at  $U_1$ .

<sup>3</sup> Suits claims that "nothing in my account of Utopia *requires* individual omniscience", though he permits us to "suppose that the Utopians have the kind of omniscience that includes mental telepathy, which *could indeed make impossible the playing of most games*" (Suits 19--b, pp. 24-25, emphases mine). If Suits' utopians are truly omniscient—having "acquired all the knowledge there is" (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 186)—then, paradoxically, utopians cannot enjoy games *as* games, for 'all knowledge' presumably includes knowledge of the future; which includes the outcome of all future games. Games of chance can be parsed as deterministic if one precisely understands how the laws of physics decide what face a die will fall on, or exactly how the mathematics behind a computer algorithm will generate supposedly 'random' digits. Games of skill can also be parsed as predetermined if the exact skill levels of all competitors and the particular moves they will make are accurately known in advance of a contest. It is a distinctive feature of a game for Suits that "the outcome is not known beforehand"—this is, for Suits, what separates a game from a performance or *scripted* undertaking (Suits 2014 [1978], pp. 97-98)—he would hold that a game with a known outcome is no game at all. The only way out of this conclusion is either to (somehow) argue that knowledge of the future is not perfectly inferable from having perfect knowledge of everything in the present and the past, or to impose some limitation on utopian powers. Suits attempts to achieve this latter aim via the following injunction: "all the telepathic players need do is refrain from exercising that particular talent (that is, they, like any game player, will confine themselves to lusory means) *in order to* play games which require concealment or deception" (Suits 19--b, p. 25). I am indebted to Uku Tooming for initially bringing this point to my attention during my 2018 presentation to the Canadian Philosophical Association.

<sup>4</sup> Suits' 100% efficient, telepathically-controlled supercomputers would be the most effective suicide machines ever invented, if indeed the perfect programme of psychological conditioning outlined for his utopians (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 183) would actually allow them enough latitude of desire to crave death in the face of unremitting existential boredom.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hurka criticizes Suits on precisely this point: that Suits “argues for the strong thesis that playing games is not just an intrinsic good but the supreme such good, since in the ideal conditions of utopia, where all instrumental goods are provided, it would be everyone’s primary pursuit.” Hurka, by contrast, favours “the weaker thesis that playing games is one intrinsic good” among many (Hurka 2006, p. 220).

<sup>6</sup> Achievements are in this sense temporally transcendent, and on this ground intralusory achievements constitute Suits’ best bet at salvaging his thesis of utopian gameplay as being the ideal of existence.

<sup>7</sup> It is very odd, if not a contradiction in terms, to speak of ‘immortal human beings’, or indeed ‘post-instrumental human beings’. This may give us some grounds for us to suspect that it may be a successor species, and not our own, which would be able to successfully inhabit a Suitsian utopia. Indeed, there may be insufficient overlap between the experiences of such hypothetical entities and our own for us to relate to the contents of their consciousnesses, or adequately assess the biological gap which must obtain in order for utopians to achieve immortality.

<sup>8</sup> While I harbour theoretical reservations as to whether Koler’s game ‘nesting’ relationship is value-conferring in precisely the manner he claims it is, or whether existential malaise in Individual Life can be successfully defeated by a reorientation of attention toward Fate of Humankind (or whether philosophical doubts about FH can be ameliorated by a retreat into IL), I can cast only a Parthian shot toward these concerns in the current article.

<sup>9</sup> By comparison, “our own culture is based on scarcity” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 194) and is thus “more inclined to emphasize closed games” (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 149) which are typically *competitive*.

<sup>10</sup> As Scott Kretchmar notes, more generally: “*The Grasshopper* is fundamentally about boredom and how we might best cope with it” (Kretchmar 2008, p. 152). Kretchmar correctly identifies the concept of ‘occupational methadone’ or ‘games-by-default’ when he writes that Suit is primarily interested in “a particular species of games—one that, in effect, provides a substitute for work” (Kretchmar 2008, p. 152). My schema builds on his, however, in that I posit that Suits’ ultimate aim is to replace these play-working games-by-default, needed at time  $U_1$  to help overcome the Alexandrian condition, with games-by-design—truly utopian games that go beyond mere labor-surrogates and express the ideal of human existence—at time  $U_2$ .