Triad Trickery: Playing with Sport and Games

Meier

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Strategy

- To define games, sports, and play
- To distinguish his definitions from Suits's definitions
Importance of Clear Definitions

- Meier acknowledges the importance of clear definitions of games, sports, and play in any project concerned with analyzing, clarifying, or understanding the nature of these activities and their impact on society.

- Despite this importance, there is no clear definition and no clear consensus on these three concepts.

The Problem of Sport

- The lack of conceptual and logical clarity can be clearly seen in the concept of sport.
  - See page 13 for a laundry list of opaque and conflicting definitions of sport.
  - The laundry list includes "...bland assumptions, spurious distinctions, unsupported generalizations, limited applications, and, finally, simple contradictions and logical errors." (13)

- In spite of the failure to clearly define the concept, Meier thinks a definition of sport is possible.
Defining Games

- Before offering a definition of sports, Meier presents a definition of games
- Borrowing from Suits, games are
  1. goal–directed activities
  2. rules limit the permissible means of goal attainment
  3. rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means
  4. rules are accepted to make the activity possible
- Meier thinks that #3 is the most important feature of games
  - Limiting certain means of goal attainments, requiring less efficient means, is what makes games games, as opposed to technical activities or non–games

Defining Sports

- Meier's definition of sports builds upon Suits' definition of games
- Sports are games which require the demonstration or use of physical skill and prowess
  1. goal–directed activities
  2. rules limit the permissible means of goal attainment
  3. rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means
  4. rules are accepted to make the activity possible
  5. and, require the demonstration of physical skill and prowess
Skill and Sports

• For Meier, the degree of physical skill exhibited in a sport is not what makes a sport. Baseball is still a sport even if the players are not very good.

• What makes an activity a sport is independent of the skill of the participants

• As Meier notes, Suits thinks of sports as "games of skill"

• Compare this with Suits and his claim that the exhibition of skill is part of what delineates playing games from primitive play

Sports as Institutionalized Activities

• Suits also thinks that a defining characteristic of sports is that they are institutionalized

• In particular, sports have a (i) sufficient following and (ii) have been around for a while

• Meier disagrees that these two criteria are adequate for determining when a sport is/is not institutionalized:

  • (i*) There is no non–arbitrary standard for how long a rule–bound, physical activity must be in existence before it becomes a sport

  • (ii*) There is no non–arbitrary standard for how many participants must participate in a rule–bound, physical activity for it to become a sport

• The longevity and quantifiable aspects of a sport are not essential characteristics of that sport, but speak to the social conditions in which that sport is situated
Relationship between Games and Sports

- Meier clearly sees sports as a subset of games
  - For Suits, sports and games overlap, but there are sports that are not games
  - What are these?
  - Amateur and professional performances

Suits: Games and Performances

- "In games, rules...are the crux of the matter. Just these rules generate just these skills. In performances, ideals are the crux of the matter. Just these ideals generate just these skills. That is why it is possible to speak of a perfect performance, at least in principle, without fear of contradiction, whereas a perfectly played game, as I have tried to show elsewhere, seems to lead to a paradox." ("Tricky Triad”, 6)
Suits: Some Sports Are Not Games

- Suits says some sports are not games because some sports are "judged performances" and judged performances have no rules

1. Games are rule bound activities.

2. “Sports performances” are judged activities whose outcome is not constrained by rules.

3. Thus, “sports performances” are not games.

Meier's First Rebuttal

1. If there are rules which constrain performative activities and establish a competitive context, then performances meet the conditions of being a competitive game.

2. Competitive gymnastics and diving are "guided, minimally, by rules that dictate such restrictive items as place of competition, starting time, internal diving rotations, each diver's permitted time interval before attempting the next specified dive, and so forth..." (19)

3. Such "minimal rules" constrain the performative activities.

4. Such constraints on the performative activities establish a competitive context.

5. Therefore, gymnastics and diving are competitive games.
Meier's Second Rebuttal

- Meier's second rebuttal uses the example of offsides offered by Suits

1. In football, offsides violations are regulative rules that specify a penalty when committed
2. Regulative rules are "extensions" or a subset of constitutive rules.
3. In gymnastics, when one falters upon dismount, then one is penalized.

5. Thus, in performance sports, regulative rules are extension or subsets of constitutive rules which constrain permissible actions.

Meier's Third Rebuttal

- Meier's third rebuttal turns on the game criteria of using less efficient means of overcoming barriers

1. All gymnastic events incorporate constraints: balance beam, parallel bars, rings, and floor exercises could be easier than they are if the constraints were different.
2. All diving events incorporate constraints: jumping from a platform or springboard and completing numerous compulsory dives.
3. "[T]hese difficulties or performance obstacles are deliberate artificial constraints, imposed predominantly to increase the inefficiency of attaining the desired prelusory goal."

4. Therefore, performance of compulsory moves within a constrained context are required by constitutive rules that make possible the competition.
Meier's Fourth Rebuttal

1. According to Suits, the 100-yard dash is a paradigm game.

2. The 100-yard dash is an exceedingly simple activity with few constraining rules.

3. Performance events, like gymnastics and diving, have many imposed rules constraining the acceptable means of accomplishing the event goal.

4. There is no principled reason why sprinting events are games and gymnastics and diving are not games.

5. Thus, denying gymnastics and diving the status of games in arbitrary and unfounded.

Meier’s Conclusion

- Meier presents four arguments against Suits’ claim that performance sports (like gymnastics and diving) are not games
- Meier’s argues that gymnastics, diving, and other performance sports are games
- Thus, Suits’ distinction of sports and games is incorrect.
Meier notes that the concept of play has often been defined negatively:

- Play has been defined by what it isn't
  - e.g., "not serious, not real, disconnected, non-productive, unnecessary, and so forth" (25)
- Meier offers a positive "definition based upon the orientation, demeanor, or stance of the participant" (25)
- Play is an autotelic activity. . .
  - "an activity voluntarily pursued for predominantly intrinsic reasons" (25)
Play as Autotelicity

- Autotelic means an event or activity valued for itself.
  - The idea is that one plays for the value the activity has in the very act of performing the action.
  - The action is rewarding and valuable just because one is participating in that action — one needs no other reason for acting than the action itself.
  - For all intents and purposes, Meier and Suits agree on this definition of play

Playing Sports and Games

- Given this definition, Meier suggests that the context in which one participates in a game or sport determines whether one is playing the game or sport
  - "if games or sports are pursued voluntarily and for intrinsic reasons, they are also play forms; if they are pursued involuntarily or engaged in predominantly for extrinsic rewards, they are not play forms." (25)
Instrumental and Autotelic

- An instrumental activity is one that is "valued" for some benefits or payoffs that it is expected to provide
  - For example: money, fame, or getting the gold
- An autotelic activity is one that is valued for itself
  - For example: the love of the game

Suits: Amateur Activity and Autotelicity

- Contrasting pairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>work</th>
<th>play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>serious</td>
<td>non-serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instrumental</td>
<td>non-instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional</td>
<td>amateur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Suits wants to substitute another set of terms for the last pair

| instrumental activity or event | autotelic activity or event |
Winning and Autotelicity

- Suits claims that the "compulsion to win" changes an activity from being autotelic to instrumental

- Too much of a competitive spirit, too much desire on winning means one is no longer participating in that sport for the mere love of it (autotellically)

Can One Play Professional Sports?

- If “playing” requires pursuing an activity for intrinsic reasons, can professional athletes “play” their respective sports?

- Suits says, No, one cannot play professional sports.

- Professional athletes, in virtue of being professionals, pursue their sports for extrinsic reasons

- e.g. Manning did not play in this year’s Superbowl, he worked in this year’s Superbowl
Meier: Play Depends on Motivating Reasons

- But, Meier notes that "play and sport…are not necessarily exclusive entities"
- They are not on opposite ends of a continuum

Play  ———————————————————— Sport

- What matters for determining whether Barry Bonds was playing baseball is what motivating reasons Bonds possessed.
- "particular attitudes or stances manifested by the participants, including motives and inducements for engagement as well as the setting for the action, do not dictate whether a specific activity may legitimately be termed a sport. The essence of sport is independent of these concerns. However, such factors most certainly determine whether or not the sport activity at hand is also a form of play." (26)
Questions About the Conception of Play

- What is an intrinsic reason?
  - What is intrinsic? What is extrinsic?
  - What types of things are intrinsic or have intrinsic properties?
  - Are reasons the type of things that have intrinsicality?
  - Can play be more or less pure, depending on the "predominant" reasons one engages in one's sport?