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What do players do in a game¹? A Habermasian perspective

Xiaolin Zhang, Emily Ryall and Andrew Edgar

ABSTRACT By adopting Habermas' communicative theory, this paper categorizes players' actions into four elements. The strategic action involves players manipulating each other within the game's framework; normative action is manifested in following the rules and the underlying ethos; dramaturgical action emerges through the players' deliberate presentation of themselves to both participants and spectators; and communicative action reveals the purpose of a game as a way of being. The conceptualization of game actions leads to a qualitative redefinition of the perfect game, which enables a greater understanding of the game, its participants, and human excellence. As such, this paper's significance lies in the proposal that the Habermasian perfect game is a potential solution to Suits' puzzle about what type of games can be played in his Utopia.

KEY WORDS Habermas; theory of communicative action; perfect game; Utopia

Conceptions of game-playing

There have been several influential conceptualizations of game-playing as a phenomenon. For instance, Caillois (1958) argued that play is an activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules and make-believe. Weiss (1969) extended this to game-playing by suggesting that players assume designated roles and strive to achieve excellence. Perhaps, the most influential conception comes from Suits (1978) who asserted that game-playing is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. More recently, Nguyen (2020) proposed that game-playing is an art form that utilizes the medium of agency. Despite the valuable insights offered by these theories, they fall short in terms of comprehensiveness. For example, they fail to explain why players sometimes engage in intentional losing, as evidenced by phrases such as 'taking a dive', 'throwing a race' and 'tanking'. Nor have they addressed the question of what might constitute a perfect game. This paper seeks to address these gaps in the literature by applying Habermas' Communicative Theory to analyze players' actions in a game and to explore the concept of perfection in game-playing accordingly. Through an exploration of these issues, this paper aims to contribute to the existing

understanding of the complexities inherent in the activity of game-playing and to answer the question of what constitutes the perfect game.

Habermas's Four Sociological Concepts of Action

The 'linguistic turn' within modern philosophy marked a significant shift toward a deeper examination of language. Within this intellectual milieu, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas embarked on the intricate task of both inheriting and reshaping elements of the early Frankfurt School's critical theory. He drew inspiration from a diverse array of influences, including Austin and Searle's speech act theory, Weber's theory of rationality, Husserl's contemplations on the lifeworld, Marx's theory of communicative action, among others. This intellectual endeavor culminated in the establishment of what we now recognize as the Theory of Communicative Action.

In his early works, Habermas (1970) made a distinction between two modes of action: 'work', which entailed the rational selection of efficient means, and 'interaction' or 'communicative action', which referred to the way in which individuals coordinate their behavior through consensual norms. However, in his later works, Habermas (1984) revised these concepts to include four sociological concepts of action: 'teleological', 'normatively regulated', 'dramaturgical' and 'communicative'. They can be summarized as follows:

Teleological action: This is an action aiming at achieving specific goals. The actor seeks to attain an end or bring about a desired state by selecting means that hold the promise of success in the given situation and employing them appropriately. The teleological model of action becomes a strategic model of action when the actor engages in rational calculations regarding the success of the action in achieving their objectives. This model is often understood from a utilitarian perspective, as the actor calculates and selects means and ends based on maximizing utility or anticipated utility (Habermas, 1984). In teleological strategic action, others are objectified and viewed merely as tools for realizing one's own ends. Mutual cooperation or understanding of others is not required unless the desired end necessitates recognizing others as autonomous agents. Consequently, teleological strategic action is more likely to result in actions that are strategically viewed as achieving success, even if this entails resorting to deception or violence.

Normatively regulated action: This action is performed by individuals who share values and norms that define their social world. It entails a tacit acknowledgment of one's membership in a social group by behaving in ways that are anticipated and accepted. These behaviors encompass actions that could vary in different social contexts, such as the provision of half-time oranges by the home team for both teams or the use of a knife and fork for eating. In alternative social settings, half-time oranges may not be a social norm, or the expectation might be to use chopsticks instead of a knife and fork. According to Habermas (1984), members of these social worlds are entitled to anticipate specific behaviors from others. In normatively regulated action, one accepts the norms or rules based on the belief that all others accept the norms as well. This predictability of action acts as a social lubricant, facilitating peaceful coexistence among individuals.

Dramaturgical action: This action involves the conscious awareness of the actor regarding their public image and their deliberate efforts to manage and manipulate it accordingly. This type of action is rooted in two fundamental aspects: first, individuals have access to their private world of thoughts, intentions, feelings and desires; and second, there exists a distinct public world where others make inferences about the contents of this private world. The actor can exploit the gap between their private and the public worlds to create an impression for others that may or may not accurately reflect their true inner self. For example, an individual might feel nervous and unconfident before an important event, yet he/she can present a public image of strength and assertiveness. As Habermas (1984) notes, the presentation of self does not entail spontaneous expressive behaviour, but rather involves stylizing the expression of one's own experiences with the aim of influencing the perception of the audience.

Communicative action: This refers to the interaction among two or more individuals who employ formal language, often in the form of speech, to coordinate their actions. This enables them to exchange epistemological, ontological and axiological aspects, such as their perception and interpretation of a situation, their role within it, and what factors are most and least important, to elicit a mutual understanding and coordinated action. In communicative action, social agents reach a consensus on the nature and meaning of the common 'lifeworld' they inhabit, and thereby the nature and legitimacy of their respective actions. They do so by recognizing that they share a common understanding of the immediate social context and have insight into each other's goals and motivations. Whilst communicative action often takes the form of language, as noted by Habermas (1984), it can also occur through non-verbal

communication, such as bodily movement. For instance, a player using a hand and arm gesture to signal the need for medical assistance on the field.

These four sociological actions can be further elucidated by considering their validity claims, relationship to other worlds, and coordination mechanism (see Table 1). Validity claims, in the context of Habermas’s discourse ethics, refer to the types of claims or justifications that individuals put forward in ethical discussions. They encompass ‘truthfulness’, which pertains to the extent of correspondence with factual reality; ‘rightfulness’, which pertains to alignment with existing normative values; and ‘sincerity’, which pertains to the manifestation of genuine intentions. The notion of ‘other worlds’ refers to the ontological perspective of ‘subjective’, ‘objective’ and ‘intersubjective or social’ worlds, which are extended and restructured based on Popper’s three worlds theory. Within this framework, the subject, acting as an agent, maintains simultaneous connections with these three dimensions. The coordination mechanism encompasses ‘influence’, which entails persuading others to adopt one’s viewpoints or arguments, and ‘agree’, which emphasizes shared understanding and consensus. As depicted in the table, the first three sociological actions (teleological, normatively regulated and dramaturgical) align with different validity claims and possess different ontological statuses. In contrast, communicative action encompasses all three validity claims and serves as a bridge across different worlds. Consequently, communicative action is more firmly rooted in discursive rationality than the other three actions.

Sociological actions	Validity claim	Relationship with different worlds	Coordination mechanism
Teleological (strategic) action	Truthfulness	Objective world	
Normatively regulated action	Rightfulness	Social world	Influence
Dramaturgical action	Sincerity	Subjective world	
Communicative action	Truthfulness	Objective world	Agreement
	Rightfulness	Social world	
	Sincerity	Subjective world	

Table 1. Habermas’ Four Sociological Concepts of Action

After the introduction to Habermas’ four sociological concepts of action, the question that naturally emerges is: How can a comprehensive analysis of these sociological actions significantly contribute to deepening our understanding of the intricate dynamics and complexities involved in the realm of game-playing?

A Habermasian analysis of players' actions in a game

The idea that sport mirrors wider society² is not new, from George Orwell's (1945) comment that 'sport is war minus the shooting', to C. L. R. James' (1963) depiction of colonialism through sport, to Patricia Collins' (1990) work suggesting that sport reflects hierarchical gender and racial norms and subjugation. More recently, Morissette (2014) has argued that through its practice, sports produce images and representations that echo human social life. In this vein we will argue, from a Habermasian perspective, that games and sports are the archetype of society as they encompass the four sociological actions. This assertion stems from the fact that all players involved must adhere to a set of rules in order to participate in the game and they must possess a clear objective or goal that guides their actions. Additionally, players inevitably present themselves to each other and the spectators in a game. Lastly, effective communication with their team members is essential for successful coordination and collaboration. Hence, the intricate dynamics of games and sports encapsulate the fundamental aspects of human society.

The Teleological or Strategic player

For Habermas, strategic action is a subset of teleological action, but he uses 'strategic' and 'teleological' interchangeably in his book *The Theory of Communicative Action* (see Bolton 2005, 7). Strategic action encompasses purposeful and rational behavior that is directed towards other individuals from a utilitarian perspective. It typically involves at least two acting subjects who, with their own distinct goals, engage in actions that revolve around influencing and aligning the decisions of other actors. Edgar (2007) argues that from the player's perspective, the ultimate goal of the game is to undermine the autonomy and sporting competence of their opponents to the degree necessary for their own sporting competence to triumph. Therefore, strategic action is an integral part of games and sports, as players seek to outperform their opponents through tactics such as exerting greater physical force or employing deceptive maneuvers. It is within this context that strategic action assumes a significant role in shaping the dynamics and outcomes of games and sports.

Games and sports manifest both overt strategic acts involving legitimate violence and covert acts of deception. It is important to note that illegitimate violence, which violates the normative and constitutive rules of the game, is not considered part of the game. Overt violence may simply overpower an opponent's competence, reducing them to a quasi-object, as seen in knockout punches in boxing, for instance. Deception similarly exploits an opponent's

competence. For example, the opponent's ability to anticipate the nature and direction of a pass as an intentional action within the rules of, say, rugby, is exploited by the feigned pass. Another example is poker, where all players engage in consensual strategic action. Each player aims to manipulate others through card play, as well as by controlling their facial expressions to hide 'tells' and other cues. In fact, most games involve some form of strategic action, at least in so far as feints are part of the game. To some extent, it is the strategic actions that make some games more exciting and enjoyable. However, all these acceptable strategic actions occur within the game's boundaries, indicating that one can engage in strategic behavior while still respecting the intrinsic value and normative structure of the game. A further type of strategic action is sometimes referred to as 'gamesmanship', which as described by Howe (2004), also involves artful manipulation of the rules, psychological manipulation of opponents or officials, intimidation tactics, nondisclosure of information, deception, or the instrumental use of the rules, all while remaining within the confines of the competition's regulations. Leotaa and Turp (2020) even argue that gamesmanship is a form of strategic excellence and an integral aspect of competitive sports.

Strategic action rises to a new level when the deception is not part of the agreed and expected part of the game, but is used for purposes outside the game, such as fixing a bet. For example, the players may intentionally lose a game in order to profit monetarily from gambling. Another example involves a team's embellishing their win/loss record by intentionally losing the first game of a tournament, placing themselves in a lower bracket with a higher chance of winning subsequent games. At the time of writing (in 2023), NBA basketball teams are allegedly tanking in order to secure better draft picks in the upcoming draft. In these cases, they treated their competitors merely as a means to their own ends, rather than pursuing it for its intrinsic value. Even those who seek to achieve the end of playing the game (for example, prolonging the game by helping an opponent) do not necessarily escape this phenomenon. They may want, in Suits' words, their own eventual victory to be more satisfying, to play a better rather than a worse game, or they may want to win but do not want to win too soon (Suits, 1969). This, at least in the short term, means that their actions cannot be discussed and negotiated – they cannot be brought into the sphere of communicative action. That is, strategic action outside a game is considered unacceptable.

The Normatively Regulated player

According to Habermas, social norms emerge from communicative processes that facilitate collective development and consensus on shared expectations for guiding social behavior. The normative regulation of action occurs when individuals grasp and internalize these social norms, which then influence their behavior in society. As a result, normative regulated actions enable individuals to engage in cooperative behavior based on shared values, rather than simply pursuing their self-interests. From this perspective, the game world bears a striking resemblance to Habermas' social world. Or we may say that it is a social world writ small, because it is primarily the rules that establish the boundaries of the game world. Formalists suggest that these rules are fully constitutive of the game, determining what actions are permitted and accepted within its framework. On this view, the rules can be understood as normative instructions that guide the player's conduct. For example, a rule may stipulate that a player must stay within the lines of the court while dribbling the ball, or that they must employ a club adhering to the Equipment Rules. In this context, the rules function as normative instructions, providing guidance on how the player should proceed with their actions if they are to continue to constitute the game, and embody the status of a game-player. The player who embraces normative regulation willingly accepts and adheres to the rules as a prerequisite for participating in the game. By doing so, they actively engage in a normatively regulated approach, upholding the rules as a means to play the game and fulfill the role of a player.

A criticism of the Formalist position is that it only tells half the story in normatively regulated games, since the formal rules are insufficient to tell players what is or is not 'normal'. Players are also regulated by conventions and the ethos of the game in the 'set of unofficial, implicit conventions which determine how the rules of a game are to be applied in concrete circumstances' (D'Agostino 1981, 17). For instance, in soccer, if a player becomes injured on the pitch, despite there being no formal rule that states play should be halted, the convention (at least in some cultures) is that the opposition players do not take advantage of the injury, but rather kick the ball out of play to temporarily stop the game. Similarly, whilst most sports have formal rules around the 'spirit' or 'character' of the sport, there are no behaviors that are explicitly outlined that align with or contradict that spirit. Consequently, it is the individuals within the game who, guided by socially developed norms, determine the actions that exemplify or defy the spirit of the sport. So whilst the Formalist position may mirror legal rules in broader society, it is this Conventionalist approach that more accurately reflects the unwritten norms governing social interactions outside the game.³ Taken together, it is clear that

players' actions in sport can be seen as normatively regulated as suggested in Habermas' framework.

The Dramaturgical player

The concept of the Dramaturgical player aligns with the sentiment expressed by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' (Act 2 Scene 7). This is echoed by Suits (2023) who believes that life is a game which most of us, at any rate, do not know we are playing. Goffman in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) argues that social life is a 'performance' carried out by 'teams' of participants in three places: front stage, back stage, and off stage. The 'front stage' represents the visible part of an individual's performance, where they present themselves to others, akin to actors performing on a stage for an audience. The 'back stage', on the other hand, refers to the private area where individuals can relax and be their authentic selves, away from the gaze of others. Lastly, the 'off stage' denotes a space completely detached from the performance, where individuals can act freely without considering societal norms or their public image. Inspired by Goffman's analysis, Habermas further explores the notion of social action as dramatic encounters. He views participants in social interactions as performers who engage with each other and present themselves in specific ways, consciously shaping how they are perceived by others (Habermas, 1984).

In many games, the players' presentation of themselves to each other, and to spectators, is an integral aspect of what is entailed in playing the game. A prime example of this can be observed in the realm of poker, where players strive to conceal their tells in order to prevent their opponents from gaining an advantage. In this sense, the player assumes the role of an actor. Paul Weiss (1969) drew a parallel between the rules of sport and the script of a play, highlighting that players adopt roles shaped by rules, similar to how an actor's performance is guided by a script. According to Weiss, for a player, 'a role defines a status and a function assumed for a time, requiring in different situations that certain selected things be done and others not' (Weiss 1969, 80), and 'when he plays on a team he carries out a role in relation to the roles others assume' (Weiss 1969, 160). Similarly, Gebauer (1993) describes a game as a theatrical action enacted by individuals. It unfolds as if on a stage, with the stadium or sports hall serving as the theater. In their roles, players can adopt personas that differ from their non-sporting, everyday selves. For example, a player may portray an intimidating and aggressive character on the field, contrasting with their off-field persona. Employing such dramaturgical

actions in a game involves seeking advantages through deceptive body language and seductive strategies, which confound opponents' expectations (Aggerholm, 2013). Additionally, high-profile professional athletes often find themselves exposed to public scrutiny, leaving little room for hiding or escaping during their performances. Whether the scrutinizing 'eye' is directly human or via the camera lens, these athletes are acutely aware of being observed and may purposefully play to the audience (Roderick & Allen-Collinson, 2020). For example, they may display distinctive hairstyles, tattoos and other body symbols, showcasing what Bourdieu (1987) refers to as 'taste'. Furthermore, athletes may perform with grace and watch their body language due to the awareness that people are watching them, echoing Stahl's notion that 'the spectators take on the disciplinarian role of the Panopticon.' (Stahl 2022, 160)

The Communicative player

The game world is not solely constituted by an individual's actions; it requires engagement and comparison with others, even if that 'other' is oneself playing at a different time. As noted by Simon (2004), the ideal of competition entails a mutual quest for excellence through challenge. This cooperative theory of sport demonstrates that the individual in a game is just a small part of an extensive network of relations. In this sense, games are the medium through which an individual enters a mimetically created world (Gebauer, 1993). The rules of a games therefore are akin to the grammar of a language, as they provide a platform for self-expression and communication with others. Communicative action is a necessary part of a game at least in so far as the rules of the game can be seen as a form of syntax that gives meaning to the physical movements that the players perform (Edgar 2013, 42). The physical action of kicking a ball, for example, can only be interpreted (and thus given meaning) as an attempt to score, if it is seen to be performed within the rules of the game. Both other players and the spectators will interpret it, and respond to it, in this way.

Further, participation in a game thus presupposes Habermas's point that, noted above, in order for social and communicative action to proceed, the participants must come to an agreement on the nature and meaning of the common lifeworld they inhabit. Players must thus agree (implicitly or explicitly) upon the rules and ethos of the game. Thus every agent becomes a likeness of the other. Every player is also a representation of the other. Thus, players respond to each other, not simply in terms of their physical movements, but in terms of what meaning is ascribed to those movements – and thus, in terms of the interpretation of movements, as steps

in a process of communication. This then demonstrates how games can be a way of communicating meaning and value.

In summary, according to Habermas, communicative action demands that social agents reach agreement over the nature and legitimacy of their respective actions. They coordinate their actions with one another because they acknowledge that they share a common understanding of the immediate social context and understand each other's goals and motivations. In games, all players are conscious and active agents, who possess a shared understanding of the symbols, environment, norms and rules of the game. This shared understanding is the basis for players to attribute meaning to the movements of others. The fact that players recognize each other's rights, obligations and roles within the game illustrates the reciprocal nature of communicative action.

Communicative action presupposes that players respect fellow agents in the game as competent and autonomous beings, and indeed that they mutually rely upon each other's competence in order to interact successfully. Edgar (2007) suggests that athletic competencies are non-linguistic in nature, but are not thereby prior to and awaiting constitution in ordinary, conceptual, language⁴, nor are they necessarily inferior to linguistic competencies. Within the game, players develop an embodied intelligence that complements their linguistically articulated decision-making and interpretative abilities as socially competent individuals. In this context, the epistemology of 'knowing how' is as communicative as 'knowing that'. Players must possess the capacity to comprehend and utilize the language of the game, including its rules, objectives, and strategies. They must also be able to coordinate with other players, effectively communicate their intentions, and negotiate outcomes. This aspect of communication is not merely a means to an end; rather, it is an integral part of what makes games enjoyable and meaningful. Therefore, it can be inferred that communicative competence is inherent to playing games, and should not be seen solely as a resource to be instrumentally exploited.

The significance of games as a reflection of broader society may be seen to lie in a paradoxical quality that arises from considering games as communicative action. Players simultaneously acknowledge and respect the game's normative and communicative underpinnings, but do so while, typically, engaging in strategic actions against their opponents. Take chess, for instance. It requires both strategic thinking and communicative competence. Players must understand and follow the rules of the game, coordinate their moves and

communicate their intentions to their opponent. At the same time, chess is a competitive game where players strategically act against each other, aiming to outmaneuver their opponent, conceal their strategic intentions, capture their pieces, and ultimately checkmate their king. It is this paradox that makes chess a challenging and rewarding game to play. Such then is the paradoxical nature of games that, in consenting to be deceived, the players do not give up a form of communicative action (in that all players respect and are able to communicate through – and even negotiate the interpretation of – the constitutive and normative rules).

Communicative play: a possible way to redefine the concept of ‘perfect game’

Regarding the porous nature of the boundary between a game and the non-gaming, everyday world, it may be suggested that any aspiration to perfection in a game entails sealing, as far as is possible, that boundary, so that it is in terms of the question of perfection that the intrinsic values of the game matter most. However, what is perfection in a game, or what is a perfect game remains a contested issue. A Habermasian perspective may go some way to providing an answer.

From a quantitative definition to a qualitative definition of a ‘perfect game’

A ‘perfect game’ is generally defined quantitatively. In baseball, for example, a perfect game occurs when a pitcher retires all 27 opposing batters, without any of them reaching base. This means no hits, no walks, no hit batters, and no errors. It is an extremely rare and remarkable feat. In the sport of bowling, a perfect game is achieved when a bowler successfully rolls twelve consecutive strikes in a single game. This results in a score of 300, which is the highest possible score in bowling. Kupfer (2001) refers to this as the ‘perfection of negation’, where players fully achieve a definite objective of the sport, nullifying their opponents as competitors. In such cases, the absolute limit is reached within the game, showcasing physical excellence. However, such quantitative definition of a perfect game is anything but flawless. Firstly, it neglects the influence of luck. Can a game truly be considered perfect if a player achieves twelve consecutive strikes in bowling purely by sheer luck? The element of chance undermines the notion of quantitative perfection. Additionally, quantitative perfection is practically unimaginable or unattainable in most games, as they lack definitive limits (Edgar 2013, 126). For example, in the case of the 100m sprint, the aim is to cover a set distance of 100 meters in less and less time, but the absolute limit cannot be reached, because no one can traverse a spatial course in no time.

For many sports, perfection is relative rather than absolute, as can be seen in foot racing, speed skating and swimming. Perfection in these cases can only be framed in relation to not being able to identify fault or suggest any improvement, particularly in terms of technical skills like reacting to the starting gun, biomechanical efficiency in acceleration, drive and diving for the finish line. Ultimately, in these cases, perfection is only determined by a subjective judgment that ‘nothing more could have been done’. Similarly, in invasion games such as football, perfection as a quantitative concept makes little sense. It could be conceptualized as a team that had 100% of possession, or a team that scored every time they touched the ball, but these are mutually incompatible since a team that scores automatically returns possession to the opponent. Therefore, it may be more meaningful to consider the concept of a perfect game qualitatively. For example, perfection can be reflected in the seamless teamwork displayed by the players, or the combination of grace and daring in a flawless run of a skilled downhill skiing athlete. Such aesthetic perspective was explored by Howe (2012) in her analysis of nature-oriented sports. She argued that perfection should not solely be measured by how far or how quickly one can move oneself or an object through space but, perhaps, how well such movements serve to bring about other goals that can be defined within the sport itself (such as aesthetic experience in nature oriented sport). According to Howe's perspective, it is possible to fall short of arbitrary or artificial goals in a game and still achieve a state of perfection.

Habermasian perfect game: recreating the spirit of play

For Habermas, communicative action represents an ideal form of social interaction characterized by a cooperative search for understanding among participants, along with the principles of truthfulness, rightfulness, and sincerity. This can contribute to the re-creation of the lifeworld by challenging oppressive systems, promoting social justice, and fostering greater inclusion and equality. Drawing on this concept, the notion of a perfect game can be seen as a perfect realization of Habermasian communication. In this conception, a perfect game should embrace not just winning as emphatically as possible (teleological strategic action), but also fair play⁵ (normative action), beautiful and dramatic play (dramaturgical action), and profundity in understanding the game and the actions of participants (communicative action). In such a game, what the players do is right (they follow the rules to ensure fairness), true (they don't conceal their competence, never tank or throw a race), and sincere (they always participate in the game willingly, and avoid the primacy of external motivations).⁶ In essence, a perfect game can be defined as a sincere form of communication between two or more players

through the medium of ‘knowing how’ in the quest for excellence in terms of human capacities based upon agreed interpretations of the situation and the norms of the game.

The concept of excellence in this context extends beyond simply winning or losing; it encompasses the players’ mutual endeavor to push the boundaries of their abilities and refine their understanding of what man is and can do. This pursuit of excellence intrinsically hinges on communication within an environment that mirrors Habermas’ ideal speech situation—open, sincere, and free from coercion—where participants continually challenge and elevate each other. Furthermore, this communication, achieved primarily through the medium of ‘knowing how’ serves to enrich the quest for excellence. This interconnectedness reinforces the notion that a perfect game transcends mere competition and becomes a platform for the expression of human capacities, a shared journey towards a heightened understanding of reality. Moreover, in a game, play involves often in response to the actions of others, and in a language that is not spoken or written. To some extent, it is by means of communication between the players within the syntax of game rules, and their interpretation in terms of an agreed ethos or spirit, that the pursuit of fun, excellence or other aims is achieved. In this sense, game-playing also fosters self-awareness and an understanding of one’s inherent social nature, as the rules of a game mirror, albeit in miniature, the rules of the broader social world.

However, there are threats to communicative plays in reality. As Habermas states, our lives are being ‘colonized’ by systems and the game world is no exception. In complex modern societies, communicative and hermeneutic processes through which our meaningful, everyday lives are constituted and sustained are increasingly displaced by what Habermas calls non-symbolic steering media. These include market mechanisms and bureaucratic power relationships. In effect, society is increasingly organized and sustained, not through communicative action, but by its agents being bound to the behavioral requirements of the rules of markets and bureaucracies. This can be observed in the increasing commercialization and politicization of sport. The latest threat emerges in the potential of big data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) where game decisions are made by non-human systems that are designed to calculate the most likely actions of other players in games and maximize strategy and decisions accordingly. Such games, where the focus is entirely on winning at whatever costs – albeit within the rules of the game – are predominantly composed of instrumental actions, that neglect the communicative and dramatic aspects of sport. A system that can produce a perfect quantitative score, such as 300 in bowling or a maximum break in snooker does not lead to a perfect game. These developments neglect the vital communicative

dimensions of sports. As a result, the essence of a perfect game becomes compromised, with the pursuit of victory overshadowing the intrinsic value of sportsmanship and meaningful engagement.

Our proposition is that modern professional sports, influenced by commercial interests where the pursuit of monetary rewards and sponsorships is paramount, often overlook the communicative aspects of sport that we have emphasized. In communicative plays, however, players mutually pursue bodily excellence (object world) by voluntarily accepting and abiding by the rules (social world) with honest intentions (subjective world). Consequently, players respect the rules not merely as external constraints but as integral to their actions, fostering the ability to win gracefully and in accordance with the ethos we associate with good games.⁷ In communicative plays, the players take the game as the means of communication. Through the language of bodily movements, they can fully experience the joy and pleasure provided by the game, finding both physical and psychological fulfillment. This experience can even transcend into a spiritual realm, encompassing the holistic realization of individuals, as expressed by Weiss in his concept of achieving excellence. In such a game, Habermas' lifeworld can be recreated, as the game transcends being a mere collection of instrumental actions and becomes an ideal community of communication. When communicative action is fully realized, it also embodies a return to Huizinga's notion of the 'play spirit' (See Huizinga, 1949), where the true essence and transformative power of play are rediscovered. Within this context, even 'losing' is 'achieving' (Suits, 1969). As Mareš and Ryall's aptly put it, it manifests a 'playful attitude' that holds great significance to 'good sport, and a good life more generally' (See Mareš & Ryall, 2021).

A potential solution for Suits' puzzle

In Suits' conception of Utopia the social sciences have perfected the human psyche (Suits 2005, 150), and the telepathically controlled machines can grant any material wishes one might have (Suits 2005, 149). Therefore, game playing performs a crucial role in delineating the ideal existence – a role which cannot be performed by any other activity, and without which an account of the ideal is either incomplete or impossible (Suits 2005, 149). However, Suits hasn't explained the rationality of the game Utopia, nor has he explained what kind of games the citizens in the Utopia actually play. Only in a few lines of his book, Suits advises us that 'the games we play in our non-Utopian lives are intimations of things to come.... They are clues to

the future' (Suits 2005, 159), and argued that we need to contrive 'sports and games unthought of today' (Suits 2005, 158).

Yorke (2017) embarked on a quest to answer the question – what games will Suits' utopians play? However, he eventually came to the realization that Suits' utopians would likely constitute an alien species with distinct cultures, values, and experiential content that differ greatly from our own. Consequently, Yorke acknowledged the impossibility of describing their games, stating that the set of utopian games remains unknown and unknowable. He also rejected the notion that games serve as a universal cultural solution to the private experience of boredom, both in Suits' projected future and our present reality. Yorke even argued that Suits' assertion of game-playing as the ideal existence lacks a sufficiently robust account of utopian games.

The perfect game realized by communicative play casts light on Suits' puzzle. Suits' Utopia is a world in which all work or instrumental activity has been eliminated. Similarly, Habermas' lifeworld – particularly as it is an expression of the 'ideal speech situation' of free and open communication between all participants – is centered around communicative rationality rather than instrumental rationality. Thus, there exists a similarity between Habermas' lifeworld and Suits' Utopia. In the lifeworld, individuals engage in communicative action, which involves meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. Likewise, the games of Suits' utopians should prioritize communicative play, featuring a mutual quest for excellence (to understand what man is and can do). In this extent, Suits' utopians seek games solely for the intrinsic value of playing, rendering external motivations unnecessary for the game, be it money or fame. Therefore, the ideal game for these utopians aligns with the Habermasian perfect game, where pure communication takes precedence. Likewise, the Habermasian perfect game is characterized by its exclusion of external ends, reflecting the nature of the utopian world. Engaging Habermasian perfect games, the utopian players may strive to win, all strategic actions remain within the boundaries of the game and are considered acceptable. They approach the game with fairness, beauty, and drama, adhering strictly to the rules and showcasing their complete sporting competence. Their pursuit is solely to achieve excellence (to reveal what a man is and can do) through communicative play.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the existing literature from three distinct perspectives. Firstly, we adopted Habermas' communicative theory to examine the actions of players in games from the teleologically strategic, normatively regulated, dramaturgical, and communicative perspectives. Normative action encompasses not only following the rules but also embracing the ethos that shapes the way in which a game is played and its rules interpreted. Strategic action is also clearly present as players try to manipulate each other in accordance with the constitutive rules and normative ethos. Dramaturgical action, though it may be a form of manipulation, can also be seen in the ways in which the players present themselves to each other and to the spectators as forms the aesthetic attraction of games. It is also possible for players to enact a persona when they play, and display forms of behavior that are alien to their non-sporting, everyday selves. Finally, communicative action demonstrates the purpose of a game as a way of being, at least in so far as the rules of the game can be seen as a form of syntax that gives meaning to the physical movements that the players perform. Secondly, we redefined the concept of a perfect game from a qualitative perspective, departing from the predominant quantitative treatment of perfection. Our definition holds that a perfect game is a perfect realization of communication between humans, between humans and nature, or even between humans and transcendental beings, which is a profound alternative to the existing quantitative measure. This embraces not just winning as emphatically as possible (strategic action), but also fair play (normative action), beautiful and dramatic play (dramaturgical action), and profundity in understanding the game and the actions of one's team mates and opponents, as well as what humans are and can do. Thirdly, we proposed the Habermasian perfect game as a potential solution to Suits' puzzle regarding the types of games that should be played in his game Utopia by emphasizing the similarity between the lifeworld and Utopia. In playing a game communicatively, drawing together, self-consciously, normative, strategic, dramatic, and communicative actions, the player becomes aware of themselves and their nature as a necessarily social being.

Notes:

1. In this article, we employ the terms 'game' and 'sport' interchangeably. However, when we use the term 'sport' in this context, we are specifically referring to sports of the game-type variety. Besides, we acknowledge the significance of physicality in sports due to the inherent embodiment of humans, but we haven't dealt with the issue if the physicality makes any

difference to the game playing analysis, because a comprehensive discussion of this aspect would require a separate paper due to its depth and complexity.

2. Sport serves as a mirror of society, albeit not in a one-dimensional manner. It does more than merely reflect societal aspects; in its finer moments, it assumes the role of a model for effective communication and a societal ideal. It embodies a dual nature, transcending the ordinary, presenting itself as both a commendable exemplar and occasionally, regrettably, a showcase of human behavior that surpasses and falls short of what we encounter in our day-to-day interactions.

3. With respect to gamesmanship, noted above, it may be argued that the ethos or spirit of particular games tolerates greater or lesser degrees of gamesmanship. Thus, while gamesmanship may superficially be seen as respecting the rules and not the spirit of the sport, this is an over-simplification. In practice, to participate in certain sports may entail that the players accept gamesmanship as part of the culture and spirit of that sport. The tolerance of sledging (trash-talking) in professional cricket is a case in point.

4. We are arguing that on one level sporting action is akin to language (it has syntax and thus meaning), but the point is that this is not ordinary, spoken language. It is akin to the claim that Nelson Goodman makes in *Languages of Art* – Arts are languages, just not everyday spoken languages.

5. Habermas' discourse ethics emphasizes that moral norms should be acceptable to all individuals in a society if they engage in a fair and open dialogue. In games, the common acceptance of and respect for constitutive rules allows for a shared engagement, a shared form of life. This is itself a moral achievement that involves cooperation, respect, and social interaction.

6. We have argued above that deception (for example in the form of feints) and even gamesmanship are legitimate components of a game. The judgment that a game has been played perfectly is thus made within the context of the agreed interpretation and construction of the meaning (and thus ethos) of the game. A perfect game, in some sports, might thus involve (perhaps at least creative and witty) gamesmanship.

7. A professional foul would be a paradigmatic example of play that respects the rules – as the foul is not concealed – without respecting the ethos of the game and its communicative nature.

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