

## Discussion Note

# The Compatibility of Games and Artworks

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This discussion note is a response to Brock Rough's "The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks". (Rough, 2017) <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jpg.2736>

People often refer to games as "works of art." In a recent article (Rough 2017), Brock Rough argues that being a game is incompatible with being an artwork. I argue that Rough's reasons for endorsing this incompatibility thesis are unconvincing. Rough's arguments implausibly discount the possibility of objects whose status as the kinds of thing they are can depend on *multiple* constitutive prescriptions. His arguments also presuppose that the prescriptions which make something count as a functional kind must be *part* of the thing in question. In fairness, this presupposition is often made, albeit rarely defended. I argue that we should reject this presupposition and understand the relationship between such prescriptions and functional kinds non-mereologically, and that this further undermines Rough's argument.

## The Ontology of Games and Artworks

"We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us."

-Shakespeare (Hamlet)

I begin with a specification of the relevant sense of "game", as "game" is said in many ways. First, we use 'game' to refer to a *token contest*, as when we refer to "game 3 of the Fischer/Spassky match." Second, we use "game" to refer to an abstract type, where games are understood as abstract sets of fully specified rules and goals. When philosophers invoke games as models for phenomena like meaning, they gloss games in this way. Third, we use "game" to refer to a kind of concrete, socially embodied historical tradition. This sense of "game" is most clearly invoked when speakers discuss the way in which the rules of a given game have evolved over time. E.g., when someone says that, "The rules of chess have changed significantly over the year."

Games qua abstract types cannot undergo this sort of change in rules over time; different rules mean a different game (Cf. Ridge in progress). Fourth, "game" can refer to a more fully specified form a game can take, where a game is now understood as a proper part of an ongoing tradition.

In which, if any, of these senses does Rough argue that being a game is incompatible with being an artwork? Rough tells the reader that he is referring to games in the sense given by Bernard Suits' classic work, *The Grasshopper*. However, Suits never explicitly define "game" but instead defines "play a game." To play a game, for Suits, is to accept certain rules R which make the achievement of a given end E less efficient, to pursue E subject to the constraints imposed by R, and to accept R just because doing so makes this activity possible (Suits 2014). Suits' definition of "play a game" is compatible with more than one way of specifying the content of "game," depending on the accompanying semantics of "play".

Brock does not intend his incompatibility thesis to be understood in terms of games in the first of the four above senses – games qua token contests. His arguments are formulated in terms of games in the sense that game developers invent games, but it is the players who create token contests. This is just as well, as games in this sense very plausibly *can* be works of art. A chess player with a keen aesthetic sense will favour a more elegant or surprising way of delivering checkmate. Some chess players even put aesthetics ahead of competitive success at the margin. Players often present these games *as objects of aesthetic appreciation, created (in part) for that very reason*. Grandmaster Eduard Gufeld waxed at length about "his Mona Lisa," which he clearly considered to be not only his most beautiful victory but also a work of art (Gufeld 2001). Even if chess itself is not an artwork, it might be the medium in which artworks like Gufeld's "*Mona Lisa*" are produced. Indeed, it has been remarked that Bobby Fischer was an artist and the chess board was his canvass. Although compatible with Rough's conclusion, this is an important way in which games can figure essentially in the *production* of distinctively *lusory artworks*.

Rough is also clearly not talking about games qua abstract types. Abstract entities *obviously* cannot be artworks for the trivial reason that they are not invented or created by anyone's agency. This leaves games qua concrete socially embodied historical traditions and games qua locally specified forms of such traditions. The former are unlikely candidates for artworks. Artworks are deliberately created by artists with specific purposes in mind, whereas socially embodied historical traditions arise organically over time. This leaves games qua locally specified forms of the corresponding game qua socially embodied historical tradition as providing the most interesting interpretation of "game" in Rough's thesis.

### Three Arguments for the Incompatibility Thesis

Rough argues for the following:

INCOMPATIBILITY: No one thing can be both a game and an artwork.

Rough offers three arguments for INCOMPATIBILITY. These arguments all rely on a certain view of the way in which certain *prescriptions* or, as he sometimes puts it, *intentions*, partly *constitute* both games and artworks. Before laying out Rough's three arguments, I first explain and motivate this idea.

Rough suggests that games are partly constituted by a prescription that games are to be *played*, where what it is to play a game is given by Suits' theory. Rough makes it clear that on his reading the lusory attitude includes autotelicity — that at least one reason one plays the game is simply for its own sake — for the sake of that kind of activity. Games thus constitutively prescribe the lusory attitude; this attitude plus the resulting behaviour is sufficient for game play. In the case of artworks, the relevant prescription is that they are to be appropriately engaged with and aesthetically appreciated. What counts as "appropriate engagement" varies from one artwork to the next, and depends on factors like the artist's intentions, historical/cultural setting, etc. What is crucial to Rough's argument is that appropriate engagement requires, minimally, that one attend to all the work's "relevant features," where relevance varies in these ways.

It is important to Rough's arguments that these prescriptions are partly *constitutive* of games and artworks. The very same physical object could fail to be a game, or an artwork, in the absence of the relevant prescriptions. Rough motivates this idea with the example of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Once it was appropriated as an artwork by Duchamp, Rough suggests, the object which is *Fountain* was no longer a urinal, but was instead an artwork. On Rough's view, this is because artworks "are not merely their physical substrate, but also a collection of prescriptions, norms and conventions." (Rough 2017: 2) Because the functions, conventions, prescriptions, etc. that the object "had when it was a urinal when it was altered" it is no longer a urinal but is instead now an artwork: "It is important that the physical object that partly constitutes *Fountain* used to be a urinal, but it is also important that it is no longer a urinal, understood as a more (and differently) ontologically complex collection of objects, functions, prescriptions, etc." (Rough 2017: 3) With these background assumptions in place, we can consider Rough's arguments.

### The Argument from Incompatible Constitutive Goals

Rough invites the reader to suppose, for the sake of argument, that a given object "X" is at once an artwork and a game. Each of his three arguments take the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

A constraint on the prelusory goals of games imposed by Suits' theory is important to Rough's first argument. It is essential to Suits' account that there be some way of specifying the *prelusory* goal of a given game that is independent of the game itself, including its rules and the lusory means — the means to achieving the goal allowed by the rules. That is what distinguishes the prelusory goal from the lusory goal — the latter is specified partly in terms of the rules of the game. Since Artwork-Game X is a game, it must have some prelusory goal. Because X is also an artwork, its constitutive goal must be engaging with its relevant features and aesthetically appreciating it. This, Rough suggests, means that the prelusory goal would have to be suitable for engagement and appreciation. However, this leads to a contradiction. Why? Engaging with and appreciating an artwork requires attending to all its relevant features. Clearly, among the relevant features of a game are its rules. The goal of engaging with and appreciating X must therefore be understood as adverting, in part, to the rules of the game. In that case, the prelusory goal cannot be understood independently of the game itself: "...to reach the goal of understanding a work, an audience member must take into consideration the lusory means....this means the prelusory goal is not separable from the lusory means in the way that is required of games." (Rough 2017, 15) This contradicts our initial assumption, completing the *reductio*.

### The Argument from Inefficiency

Rough argues that because the goal of an artwork is to understand it, and that goal must take into account any lusory means used to reach that goal as part of the work, those means cannot be an inefficient way of achieving that goal. In fact, using the lusory means will, Rough suggests, be the *only* means for achieving the right kind of understanding. Using any *other* means would not result in an appreciation of all X's relevant features, since among the relevant features are the constitutive rules. The idea seems to be that to appreciate X qua art-work, one must attend to those rules by following them — that is the intended and therefore right kind of engagement. Since following the rules is the *only* way of achieving the prelusory end of appreciating the work, it follows that it is not a less efficient way of achieving that goal than some alternative means. This, though, means that the rules of X do *not* impose any inefficiency on the achievement of its constitutive goal. Given Suits' account, it follows that X is not a game. Having deduced a contradiction, the *reductio* is again complete.

### The Argument from the Insufficiency of Attitudes

Given Rough's account of the prescriptions constitutive of games and artworks, Artwork-Game X would have to simultaneously prescribe both the lusory attitude and what we might call the "artistic attitude," where the latter is one of trying to engage with the relevant features of the artwork and aesthetically appreciate them. One might worry that it is enough that the object is constituted by a prescription to have one of these atti-

tudes at one point in time, and another of them at a different point in time. In fact, Rough argues, simultaneity of these attitudes is required by the constitutive prescriptions “because being an artwork or a game...means it is appropriate to treat it as that thing whenever one engages with it” (Rough 2017, 17).

More importantly, on Suits’ account as Rough interprets it, someone’s taking the lusory attitude to a given end is *sufficient* for the relevant rules and end, in conjunction with the attitude itself to constitute a game. Thus, insofar as one’s attitudes go, the lusory attitude is *sufficient* for proper engagement with the object. However, since X is also an artwork, the lusory attitude is *not* sufficient for proper engagement with it. Even if it is possible simultaneously to take the lusory attitude and the artistic attitude to one and the same thing, they are distinct attitudes. Therefore, if one of them is sufficient for proper engagement with X, it follows that the other, being distinct, cannot be necessary for proper engagement with it:

With Artwork-Game X the lusory attitude is no longer a sufficient attitude for the proper engagement with it *qua* Artwork-Game X. Since it is also an artwork, it requires the artistic attitude...These attitudes do not overlap, thus it cannot be that one is sufficient when both are necessary (Rough 2017: 17) .

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### Compatibility Regained

Rough’s account of the ontology of games and artworks rests on the idea that the intentions, prescriptions, goals, etc. that make something into a game or an artwork are thereby literally *part* of the game or artwork in question. I shall initially grant this assumption for the sake of argument, since I think Rough’s three arguments fail even if this is conceded. I then explain how rejecting this assumption leads to a more plausible ontology and further undermines Rough’s arguments.

### The Argument from Incompatible Constitutive Goals

A crucial premise of Rough’s first argument is that because X is an artwork, its constitutive goal must be appropriate engagement and aesthetic appreciation, which in turn means that *qua* game its prelusory goal must also be appropriate engagement and aesthetic appreciation. The problem with this is supposed to be that such engagement and appreciation must include appropriate engagement with X’s constitutive rules and the lusory means for achieving its constitutive goals. This is meant to be problematic because it is incompatible with the goal in question being *prelusory* — insofar as the goal cannot be understood apart from the rules and the lusory means constitutively permitted

by the game, that goal cannot be understood independently of the game and so is not suitably *prelusive*.

The problem with this argument is that it simply assumes that the goal(s) which constitute X as a game must be precisely the *same* as the goals which constitute X as an artwork. Why allow this, though? Indeed, given that we are supposing that X is *both* an artwork and a game, it would be natural to assume instead that X has two sets of goals, one of which constitutes it as a game, and one of which constitutes it as an artwork. On this approach, the prelusive goal of X could be something which has nothing to do with aesthetic engagement/appreciation. It might be something like “deliver checkmate,” “bankrupt the opponent.” X would then *also* have the constitutive goal *qua artwork* of being engaged with appropriately and aesthetically appreciated. *That* goal cannot be understood independently of the rules and constitutive goal of X *qua game*, but so long as we keep these two sets of goals distinct, this is fine.

At this point it is useful to think about the variety of familiar objects we intuitively take to play a variety of functional roles, and where there playing these roles is part of why we classify them as falling under a given predicate. Cars are a good example. One function of a car is to enable its passengers a relatively efficient means of transportation. However, many people want their cars to be *beautiful*, and this function is taken seriously by carmakers. Moreover, the function of some cars, e.g. a Ferrari, is to convey their owners’ social status. Plausibly, a Ferrari is simultaneously a means of transportation, an artwork, and a sign of affluence. If, with Rough, we think the prescriptions which constitute an object as an artwork are literally *part* of the object, then we should say that the Ferrari is not just the physically realized vehicle. It is that physically realized vehicle *plus a range of prescriptions: to drive it, to appreciate its beauty, and to use it to show of one’s wealth*. There is no obvious reason to think that its goal *qua artwork* should somehow be any part of its goal *qua means of transportation*. Moreover, multi-functional objects are commonplace. A Swiss-Army knife is an obvious example. Most modern printers are also copiers. Much clothing is designed not only to keep one warm and dry, but also to look good. Rough’s argument thus goes wrong in simply assuming that X’s constitutive goal *qua game* must be the same, or even include, its goal *qua artwork*.

This point also undermines Rough’s characterization of *Fountain*. Recall that, according to Rough, once the object that once *was* a urinal was appropriated as an artwork, it thereby no longer was a urinal. On the more ecumenical approach suggested here, we can think of that object as *still* being a urinal even as it is also an artwork. After all, the introduction of some new norm governing something does not typically mean that the previous norms governing it no longer apply. The introduction of new legal norms governing my behaviour does not mean I am no longer also bound by moral norms. This, of course, is not to say that one ought, all things considered, use *Fountain* as a urinal

even as it is on public display in the museum! That, though, just reflects the way in which some prescriptions can outweigh others. Plausibly, functions for designed objects are fixed by a maker's intentions, and in the case of a urinal it was made with the intention of being used as a receptacle for urine. It retains that function, even though (morally, legally and aesthetically) one ought not use it for that function once it has been appropriated as an artwork. Compare: a torture device is still a torture device even if torture is always morally forbidden and so, all things considered, it ought never be used as designed. For what it is worth, not only is this the interpretation of *Fountain* most naturally suggested by the account I have laid out, I also take it to be pre-theoretically the right thing to say. Ordinary people are sometimes hesitant to consider *Fountain* an artwork, but typically even if they are convinced that it is an artwork they do not abandon the idea it is still a urinal.

### **The Argument from Inefficiency**

The central premise of this argument is that the rules constitutive of X do not impose any inefficiency on the achievement of the prelusory end because there is no way of achieving that end independently of the rules. This argument suffers from two problems. First, the point made in the previous subsection applies. The prelusory goal could be something entirely independent of aesthetic appreciation once we distinguish the prescriptions/goals/intentions constitutive of something's being a game from the prescriptions/goals/intentions constitutive of its being an artwork.

Second, there seems to be a further equivocation here between having to *follow* the rules to achieve the relevant end versus having to *contemplate* the rules to appreciate them. One might well be able to reflect on and appreciate the rules of a game in terms of their elegance and other aesthetic features without *following* or even *accepting* the rules, and thus without adopting the lusory attitude. One could then still play Artwork-Game X without engaging with it as an artwork, and one could also engage with it as an artwork without playing it. For all that has been so far argued, though, one could do both at the same time. In fact, it is notable that Rough does not assert that it is impossible to play a game while appreciating it aesthetically. Plausibly this not only is possible but is often actual and indeed an important part of why people enjoy the games that they play (compare Nguyen in progress).

### **The Argument from the Insufficiency of Attitudes**

The main idea of this argument is that it cannot be the case that both (a) the lusory attitude is at once *sufficient* for appropriate engagement with Artwork-Game X and that (b) the artistic attitude is *necessary* for appropriate engagement with Artwork-Game X, given that one can adopt the lusory attitude without adopting the artistic attitude. The problem with this move is that we again need to distinguish appropriately engaging with

*X qua game* and appropriately engaging with it *qua artwork*. All Suits' theory entails is that the lusory attitude is sufficient for engaging with a game like *X qua game*. It might well not be sufficient to engage with it appropriately *qua artwork*. Indeed, this seems like just the right thing to say given the other examples of multifunctional objects canvassed above. Pretty clearly, one can engage with a car appropriately qua object of aesthetic appreciation without engaging with it appropriately qua means of transportation. Similarly, one can engage appropriately with a glass of wine as a depressant (to "take the edge off") without engaging with it appropriately qua object of gustatory appreciation. Once we disambiguate the needed notions of sufficiency and necessity, there is no looming contradiction here.

I therefore conclude that Rough's arguments fail. Furthermore, the ubiquity of objects with multiple functions (cars, swiss-army knives, wine, *The Grasshopper*, etc.) suggests that unless there is some specific reason to think being a game and being an artwork are incompatible that we should presume that they are compatible. "Compatible unless proven incompatible" seems like a reasonable methodology.

This leaves one important piece of unfinished business. An awkward feature of Rough's approach to the ontology of socially constructed objects is its implication of an implausible multiplicity of objects in cases involving heterogeneous constitutive functions. In the case of a car (a Ferrari, say) we seem to have the following numerically distinct objects on Rough's ontology: (a) the car qua aesthetic object/artwork – that is, the physical car itself plus the prescription that it is to be appreciated aesthetically, (b) the car qua mode of transportation — the physical car plus the prescription that one use it as a mode of transportation, (c) the car qua object of social status – the physical car plus the prescription that one use it to display one's affluence. In addition to these, there are various hybrid objects (which is what an Artwork-Game would be): (d) the car qua aesthetic object *and* mode of transportation — that is, the physical car plus the aesthetic prescription and the prescription to use it as a mode of transportation, (e) the car qua aesthetic object, mode of transportation, and object of social status, and so on.

This is a rather bloated ontology. The careful reader will note that I am, in part, making an aesthetic objection to Rough's philosophical position, and I take this to be appropriate engagement, again illustrating how one and the same object (here a philosophical position) can be governed by multiple constitutive prescriptions. What is plausible in Rough's suggestion is that something cannot *be* a game unless it is governed by the right kinds of prescriptions, etc. It does not follow from this that those prescriptions are literally *part of* the game. We can instead understand the facts about those prescriptions (designer's intentions, etc.) as facts which *ground* the object's status as a game. Plausibly, facts about numerically distinct objects can ground some other object's status as being the kind of thing it is. A discoloured patch of skin counts as a sunburn only if it was caused by exposure to radiation from the sun; if it was caused by a tanning bed or



some other cause then it is not, strictly speaking, a sunburn. Similarly, we can say that a given set of rules and associated goal only *count* as a game given certain prescriptions (that one is to adopt the rules just because they make it possible to play the game, roughly) *without* being forced to say that those prescriptions are *part of the game*. Likewise, we can say that the prescription that we treat something as an artwork is necessarily present if something is to be an artwork without saying that those prescriptions are *part of the work*. The game might simply be the rules and associated goal, and the artwork might simply be the paint on canvass (e.g.) even though, in each case, the object only counts as a game (or an artwork) because the corresponding prescriptions are present. A useful comparison here is with the discussion of “enabling conditions” in the debate over moral particularism (Cf. Dancy 2004 and McKeever and Ridge 2006).

I find this approach independently plausible. It removes some of the awkwardness of Rough’s approach to clearly multifunctional entities like a car. We no longer need to posit so *many different objects* – the car qua artwork, the car qua means of transportation, the car qua artwork and means of transportation. There is just the one object – the car – the physical object we can use to get from A to B. However, that object can simultaneously count as a mode of transportation, an artwork and a tool for conspicuous consumption. In my view, this approach also yields a more natural description of *Fountain*. There are not two objects on display in the museum – the artwork and the urinal – that is one object too many. There is just the one object, but that object is simultaneously an artwork and a urinal.

Rough’s INCOMPATIBILITY seems more compelling than it should because of his mereological approach. A complication here is that games, unlike cars and urinals, *are* partly made of rules and goals, as Suits’ definition suggests. However, not *all* the rules which govern a given game are thereby *part* of that game. Plausibly, the only rules which are literally *part* of a game are the ones we refer to as “the rules of the game.” In chess, the rules of the game include things like “the bishops move diagonally,” etc. Likewise, the only goals which are literally *part* of a game are those which constitute success in the game qua game — the constitutive goal. In chess, the goal is to give checkmate or at least avoid being checkmated. The rules and goals of the game do *not* include the prescription to adopt those rules just to make the relevant activity possible. *That* prescription is not part of the game itself. It is instead part of what it is to *play* the game; as Suits himself explains, one can interact in a game without playing it. Even more obviously, then, any *aesthetic* prescriptions governing the game will not (typically) be part of the game. Nor, indeed, will they be part of the object qua artwork. They will, instead, be part of what explains why the object *is* an artwork without being part of it. If, however, we assumed that any prescriptions which make something an X must be part of that X, then we would think that the relevant prescriptions would have to be part of that X. In this case, that would wrongly imply that any prescriptions governing a

game would be part of the game. That, though, is implausible. It would wrongly predict that “make and appreciate beautiful moves” is one of the *rules* or *goals* of chess if the chess playing community generally endorsed this aesthetic norm. That, in turn, would imply that someone who did not care about beauty in chess was thereby not really playing chess, since they are not following the rules of chess and trying to achieve its lusory aim. That, though, is absurd; the chess player who only cares about winning is still playing chess. If, however, we understand the prescription to make and appreciate beautiful moves as not being part of chess, but rather what makes chess an artwork (or, perhaps, a medium for artworks) as well as a game, we can avoid such awkward consequences.

## Conclusion

I have argued that Rough’s case for the incompatibility of being a game and being an artwork fails, and that his thesis gains unwarranted plausibility from a problematic mereological approach to the ontology of games. I cannot resist concluding by illustrating the compatibility of being a game and being an artwork with none other than Suits’ *The Grasshopper*. I cannot do justice to his arguments here, but Avery Kolers has, to my mind, plausibly argued that *The Grasshopper* “is a structured game that meets its own definition.” (Kolers 2016, 729) In particular, it is a riddle-solving game, in which the lusory goals are to solve certain riddles, and whose inefficiency-inducing rule is to solve those riddles by philosophizing in dialogue form. At the same time, *The Grasshopper* is also an artwork. It is beautifully written, and Suits clearly cared about the aesthetic qualities of the book. The prescription that we appreciate its aesthetic qualities is not *part of The Grasshopper*, on this account, but rather a prescription extrinsic to *The Grasshopper* in virtue of which *The Grasshopper* counts as an artwork. Whereas the rules and goals discussed by Kolers *are part of The Grasshopper*; at any rate, they are part of *The Grasshopper* qua game if Kolers is right.

Of course, there is another sense in which *The Grasshopper* is a book rather than a game. In that sense, the relevant rules/goals are not part of *The Grasshopper*. This, though, simply reflects the fact that we can use the name of a game to refer not only to the game itself, but to the “board” and other playing pieces — the game’s medium. We can, for example, “buy *Monopoly*,” which really just means buy a *Monopoly set*, rather than the game itself in Suits’ sense (presumably *Milton Bradley* owns that). In Suits’ case, the medium of the game is also a book. However, just as there is another sense of “game” in which the game is not the medium of the game, there is another useful sense in which *The Grasshopper* is at once a game and an artwork — a lovely work of art, at that.

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