

# Envisioning Utopia

Being-in-the-zone and the game of our life

*In The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia, Bernard Suits devises a thought experiment using dialogues between Aesop's Grasshopper and two former ants. These characters debate the definition of "game," and how game playing might relate to the meaning of life. In Utopia, all activity would be voluntary and intrinsically valuable, rather than necessary and instrumentally valuable. Unfortunately, Suits leaves the reader with a choice between delusion and oblivion. Dr Deborah Vossen uses the experience of being-in-the-zone to offer an alternative, allowing for the possibility that Utopians might live meaningful lives.*

Dr Vossen's research is an interpretation of and response to the work of Suits, who is himself responding to Wittgenstein's famous assertion that games are indefinable. Yet, beyond his effort to define games, Suits seeks also to account for their significance – via the mandibles of Aesop's Grasshopper and two former ants – as a central part of the ideal of human existence. Unfortunately, Suits leaves the reader with a paradox that he himself neglects to resolve. Inasmuch as he offers readers a choice between mass delusion and existential oblivion, a more optimistic solution is required. Dr Vossen attempts to do this in her papers. Her tentative, though convincing, solution entertains the hypothesis that the mindful state of being-in-the-zone is the goal of life, with Utopians challenged with the task of devising really magnificent games as the means by which we might be brought into alignment with this ultimate guiding principle.

## WHAT IS A GAME?

Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed that the concept "game" is indefinable, for there are no essential elements that all things we call games hold in common. However, this is disputed by Suits' Grasshopper, who insists that a game is "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." All games, therefore, involve a deliberate effort to use means deemed useful in the quest to achieve a "specific state of affairs" while seeking to overcome the obstacles serving to make such achievement unnecessarily difficult.

Although Suits' parable recounts an extended discussion as to what the definition of game playing is, there is a deeper message beneath. For the definitional undertaking is significant only inasmuch as it informs the dialogue in respect to the meaning of life, the ideal of existence and the possibility of a game-playing Utopia. Conceding a tension

between the "ant" ideology of work and the "Grasshopper" ideology of play, the Grasshopper pictures "Utopia" as an ideal social state in which Utopians are free to engage in anything they might find intrinsically valuable, with games in particular qualifying as that which Utopians would choose to engage in.

## WHAT IS UTOPIA?

In our non-Utopian condition, labour is necessary to meet the survival needs of the collective human race, with unrelenting scarcity and the logic of necessity establishing the basis of the "ant" work ethic. Offering a more liberating alternative, the Grasshopper imagines Utopia as a "need-free state of play" in which all needs are met via a telepathic button that can function, and indeed always is functioning, to fulfill every need at the very moment it comes about. So imagined, the Grasshopper's Utopia is established as a need-free condition of human existence wherein there is, and can be, no requirement that Utopians engage in the instrumental work effort. For the telepathic need-fulfilling button functions in such a way as to render obsolete any obligation of goal-directed activity. Thus, with plenitude and the logic of gratuity establishing the basis of the Grasshopper's play ethic, it seems that the only activity that a Utopian might engage in would be voluntary activity undertaken as valuable in itself.

Limited to activities chosen for their own sake, the Grasshopper argues that bored Utopians finding themselves in need of some activity capable of alleviating their boredom will have no choice but to turn to games. To be sure, in an effort to fulfill the existential need of something to do, the telepathic need-meeting button will respond via the provision of a game for the Utopian to play, with the resultant activity presumably qualifying as that

which will make it possible to retain enough effort to make life in Utopia worth living.

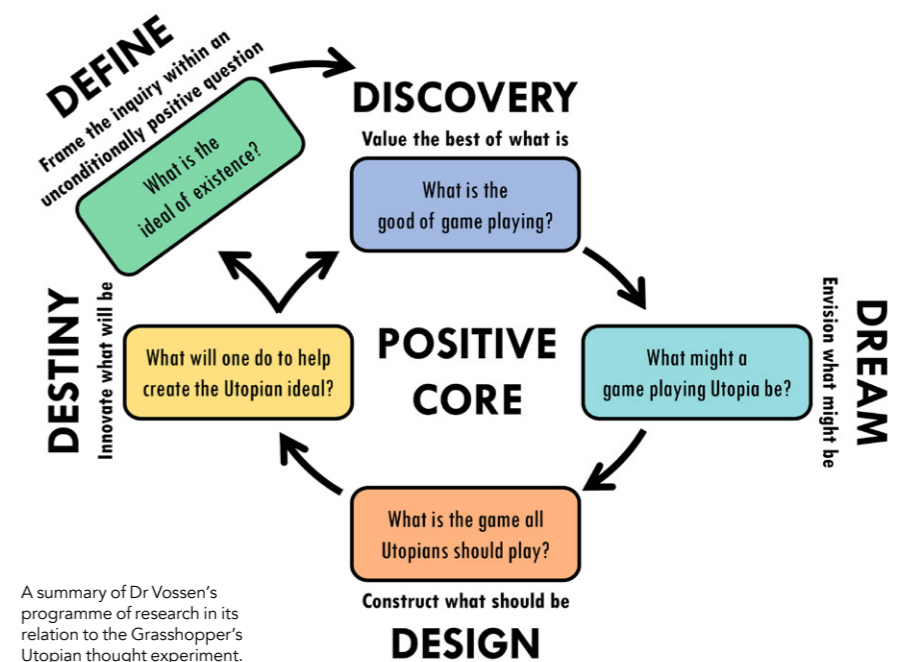
Yet, the ants reject the Grasshopper's picture of the future of humankind as a dystopian state of existence not worth living at all. Work is important. Games are not. Thus, absent the obligation to work, it seems likely that a condition of human existence restricted to game playing would lead to a state of meaninglessness, with the pervasive sense of purposelessness resulting in either oblivion or delusion.

## OBLIVION OR DELUSION? THE PARADOX OF GAME PLAYING

Unfortunately, inasmuch as the games we currently play fail to pursue goals of significance, a life of game playing modelled after our non-Utopian games fails to present as much of a life at all. Dr Vossen sums up the interpretation of the ants as follows: "any and all goal-directed achieving activities that one might adopt in Utopia are properly characterised as existentially trivial, meaningless, insignificant, inconsequential, unimportant, purposeless, childish, petty, stupid, dumb, and ultimately foolish undertakings."

Since all striving and seeking activity would fail to be directed towards a valuable end, human beings enjoying a life of games would eventually come to the realisation that the games they are playing are empty and meaningless. This would cause an existential crisis, with the fate of humankind embodying an impossible choice between two quite distressing ends: oblivion or delusion.

First, the Grasshopper pictures an empty state of existential nothingness resulting from a magnification of the upsetting epiphany that all striving and seeking activity has never been, is not now, and never will be anything at all. Acknowledging that life will not be worth living absent the belief that one is doing something useful, and that people will not want to live their lives playing trivial games, one can certainly imagine these mortified beings "simply vanishing on the spot, as though they had never been."



Second, as a strategy designed to divert the ants from entertaining the existentially annihilating insight at all, the Grasshopper predicts the establishment of an illusion of scarcity wherein the sense of existential meaningfulness will be sustained via the systemic institutionalisation of the delusional belief that labour qualifies as vitally necessary for the survival of humanity. In this regard, the working

## TOWARD A UTOPIA OF REALLY MAGNIFICENT GAMES

In his final vision, Suits' Grasshopper pictures an invitation to the entire ant race through the metaphorical "door of Utopia" to join a multitude of grasshoppers in "games so subtle, complex, and challenging that their inventors will be seen as the ludic Einsteins of the future." Through

**Utopia might be best pictured as the working state of the world established by zone-seeking Utopians each making sophisticated moves in the game of life.**

human race is destined to endure within an illusion of significance wholly misguided by the logic of necessity.

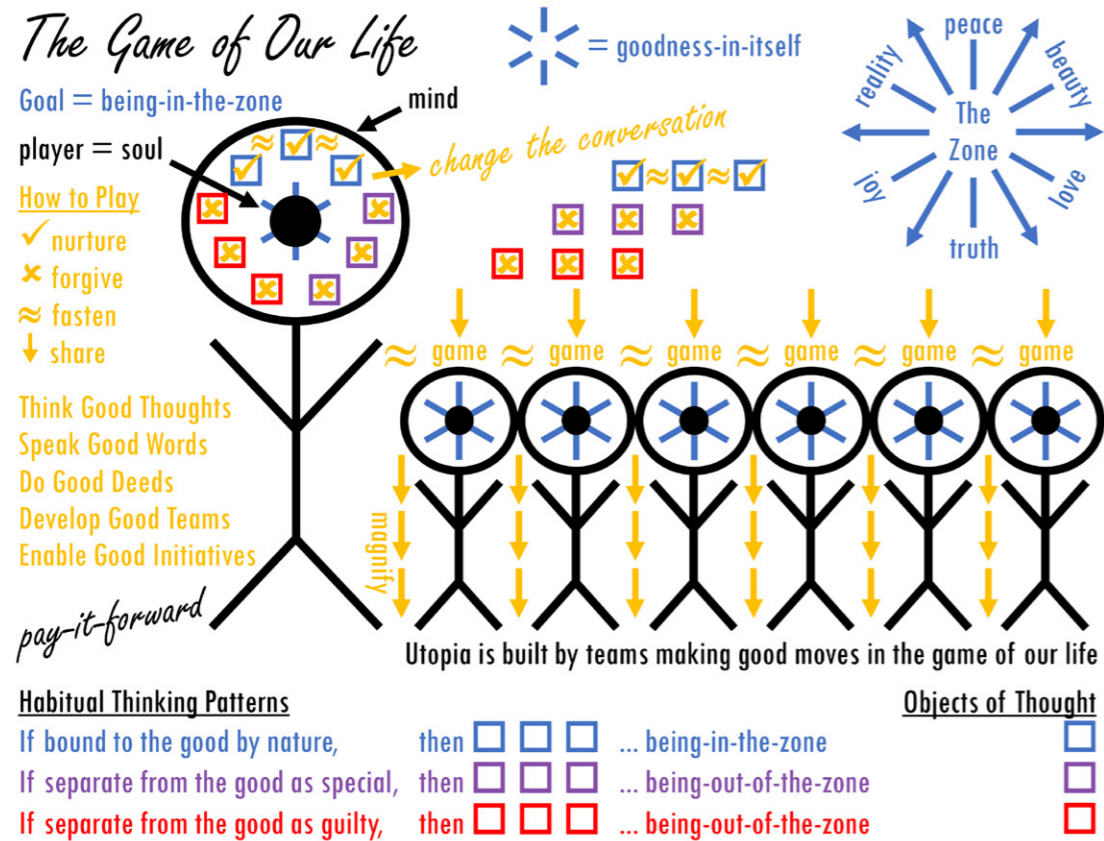
Of course, it is with the oblivion-delusion paradox that Suits' thought experiment takes root, for the unsettled reader is left with the wonderment as to how one might avoid both of these highly undesirable outcomes. Acknowledging the imperative that we look for a way out, Dr Vossen believes there is one possibility worthy of further consideration, that being the Grasshopper's proposal that Utopia might be established upon the foundation supplied by really magnificent games.

the door, he promises that those able to learn how to enjoy playing these games will undergo a beautiful metamorphosis from ants into grasshoppers. Of course, with this promise, the reader is left with the question as to what kinds of games these ants will be invited to play, with this wonderment transforming Suits' thought experiment into a game-writhing challenge very much worthy of a Utopian.

Taking up the challenge, Dr Vossen proposes that the games Utopians play might be best characterised as games of significance capable of producing good moves in the game of our life



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Dr Vossen's conceptual representation of the game of our life.

as the ancient game the Grasshopper suggests has been forgotten. Aligning with the possibility of its remembrance, she hypothesises that the mindful state of being-in-the-zone might be the goal of this ancient game, with the soul – existing in a mind, in a body, in a social environment, with other souls similarly situated – identified as its player.

Describing the zone as goodness-in-itself, with the forms of goodness

## Life is a game and the goal of life is being-in-the-zone.

including reality, beauty, truth, peace, joy and love, she describes the experience of being-in-the-zone as the mindful state of contemplating these intrinsically valuable goods. Magnifying this magnificent play experience, she argues that the Grasshopper's Utopia might be best pictured as a condition in which Utopians work-at-play, with all such work-play activities valued inasmuch as they align with the supreme end of being-in-the-zone as the ultimate state of play. So imagined, Dr Vossen maintains that a sense of existential

meaningfulness will be sustained in Utopia via the systemic institutionalisation of the empowering belief that labour qualifies as significant only inasmuch as it helps bring about the sustainable state of being-in-the-zone for all.

Now, if she is right, it seems to follow that through the door of Utopia, Suits' thought experiment might evolve into a really magnificent social experiment. With this considered, Dr Vossen's research seeks

also to clarify the essence of this game. To this end, she insists that if the goal of being-in-the-zone is a state of mind, then both the means for goal achievement and the obstacles serving to make such achievement unnecessarily difficult must also be of the mind. Thus, she hypothesises that the social architecture of Utopia will be inspired by objects and patterns of thought aligned with and directed toward the end of being-in-the-zone for all, with those rooted in guilt and specialness – as thoughts and patterns necessarily causing separation – serving as the obstacles to be overcome.

Accordingly, she suggests that the game of our life must begin with the player's conscious effort to nurture only those thoughts and patterns capable of enabling the collective experience of being-in-the-zone, with the process of thinking good thoughts also requiring that the player forgive the thoughts and patterns foundational to the experience of being-out-of-the-zone. With the fastening of these good thoughts into a coherent system of thought capable of informing action, Dr Vossen predicts that the game will advance via the player's effort to speak good words and thereby seek to change the conversation within their social environment. Next, acknowledging that the objects and patterns of thought expressed within that environment belong to those contributing to it, she suggests that the game will further advance via the player's decision to do the good deed of sharing the game so that others too might play. Indeed, with other players now similarly engaged, Utopian team-building becomes possible, as does the likelihood that these new players will seek to duplicate the pattern and thereby engage in a pay-it-forward initiative designed to inspire the collective quest to awaken humanity to the reality of "The Zone."



# Behind the Research

## Dr Deborah Vossen

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### Research Objectives

Deborah Vossen explores what the games we currently play can teach us about life.

### Details

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### Bio

Emphasising the universal experience of "being-in-the-zone," Deborah Vossen espouses the empowering life-fulfilling potential of play. Teaching several humanities courses exploring what sport teaches about life, her program of research seeks to advance a philosophical proof that life is a game, with the sustainable state of being-in-the-zone embraced as its goal.

### Collaborators

The vision of a game-playing Utopia, as well as the conceptual representation of "The Game of Our Life," would not have been possible without the ongoing engagement, over the years, of the many students enrolled in Dr Vossen's Human Kinetics courses at St. Francis Xavier University.



### References

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### Personal Response

#### How might we devise really magnificent games and what makes a game "worthy of a Utopian"?

Although my research into the rules of good Utopian game-wrighting is still in its infancy, I do have a hunch that there may be as many really magnificent games worthy of a Utopian as there will be Utopians. For the games Utopians play will be those that are devised via the really magnificent ideas of these Utopians as directed toward the mindful state of being-in-the-zone. Thus, I suspect that the "how" of Utopian game-wrighting must begin with a conscious effort to play the game of our life, trusting that the ideas originating from it will establish the foundation required for these games of ultimate significance.