

AGENCY, STABILITY, AND PERMEABILITY IN “GAMES”

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C THI NGUYEN’S “Games and the Art of Agency” is a landmark article, backed by an important and engaging book.¹ If they do not exactly inaugurate the philosophical study of games, they most certainly level it up considerably. While there is much to explore here about what counts as a game, when games constitute art, and why they are aesthetically valuable, I want to focus on what Nguyen’s discussion reveals about agency. One significant contribution of his analysis is that it highlights a profound complexity in human motivation. I think it also thereby calls into question a traditional notion of selfhood—one that plays a crucial role in Nguyen’s own analysis. Without this traditional conception, games look more like life, and both look riskier, than we might otherwise hope.

1. STRIVING PLAY AND NESTED AGENTS

Nguyen proposes that a game is a complex structure consisting of a goal, a profile of deployable abilities, and an environment (partially abstract, often also concrete) that presents obstacles to and opportunities for achieving that goal using those abilities. So, for instance, basketball is a physical game with the goal of scoring points by passing a ball through a small elevated hoop while dribbling and passing to teammates, on a court with marked zones, while avoiding noncontact obstacles constituted by the opposing team’s bodies. By creating such a structure, a game designer invites players to exercise an *agential mode*: a pairing of a type of goal (here, scoring points) with a set of skills (dribbling, shooting, blocking) and patterns of attention for fulfilling it.

A game is designed to elicit a particular mode, which is especially apt for playing it. But it also thereby makes that mode, or an analogue of it, available for real-life action. Human agency in general is characterized by a duality of limitation and flexibility: deploying one agential mode precludes another, but

1 Nguyen, *Games*.

we also expand and refine our repertoire of modes over time, and we can at least sometimes choose which mode to activate at a time. Nguyen argues that games transform this duality of limited flexibility into art, by "sculpting" and "crystallizing" agential modes into stable, tangible forms that focus attention and skills in precise, well-defined ways, which we can then deploy elsewhere, in less scripted contexts.² Participating in a game's interlocking structure of goals, abilities, and obstacles also affords access to game-extrinsic, real life goods like exercise and social connection. And it can be aesthetically rewarding in its own right, by offering an experience of harmonious "flow," and the "existential balm" of engaging with a coherent environment in which success is possible but not guaranteed.³

However, Nguyen argues that unlocking these various extrinsic and intrinsic rewards requires a "peculiar motivational two-step" of coming to care about something we recognize to be pointless.⁴ All game play involves tackling artificial obstacles under arbitrary constraints in pursuit of the artificial goal that constitutes winning—that's what makes it a game. Some players—*achievement players*—really want to win, either in their own right or as a means to fame or fortune; given this, they also really care, albeit only instrumentally, about achieving the game's internal goals. But others—*striving players*—do not care about winning; they just want to engage in the struggle, either for its own intrinsic reward or as a means to an extrinsic end like exercise or social connection. The conundrum is that playing games is defined by trying to win them. Given this, striving players must invert the ordinary structure of means-end motivation: they must (try to) win just in order to play.

How can striving play even be possible? Nguyen argues that it requires *temporarily* adopting winning as a *genuine* goal. Normatively, the striving player's behavior must be guided by trying to win. And given this, in order to play well—or even to "really play" at all—those goals must dominate their functional motivational structure and attention. This much is compatible with winning being a merely instrumental goal, as it is for the achievement player whose ultimate interest lies in fame or fortune. However, many of the ultimate goals that motivate striving players, like aesthetic appreciation or social connection, are "self-effacing": they cannot be pursued directly and "transparently."⁵ This means, Nguyen thinks, that winning must become a *disposable end*, which he in turn analyzes as a goal that is genuine and noninstrumental but adopted temporarily and voluntarily, insofar as it is "partially detached from our normal

2 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 427, 432.

3 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 456.

4 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 440.

5 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 441.

ends” in such a way that “one can rid oneself of [it] without doing significant damage to one’s enduring value system or core practical identity.”⁶

Like instrumental ends, disposable ends in the service of self-effacing ulterior goals are not especially unusual: we regularly take up hobbies like knitting, kickboxing, or cooking for the sake of health or social connection. Nguyen argues that striving play’s “motivational two-step” is more distinctive, though, because it often requires not just turning one’s attention away from the ulterior goal and toward the implementing one, but actually modifying one’s motivational structure to include goals that conflict with one’s enduring ends. So, for instance, the ultimate goal of social connection may require a local goal of ruthless domination.⁷ Likewise, within the game it is at least “odd” and perhaps incoherent to avoid a strategic move on the ground that doing so would prolong the pleasure of striving, whereas outside the game, it is reasonable to avoid acquiring additional game-relevant skills if doing so would make it too easy to win the next time one plays.⁸

Nguyen argues that in order to accommodate this divergence in motivational structures, we need to posit a layered or “nested” agent.⁹ On the inside, dominating one’s practical rationality and phenomenology, is a game agent wholeheartedly and single-mindedly focused on winning. Meanwhile, lurking in the background is an “enduring agent” who monitors the game agent’s performance “in an interestingly distanced way.”¹⁰ Ultimately, Nguyen concludes that the existence of such “purposeful and managed agential disunity” reveals human agency to be more “fluid” and “modular” than philosophers have heretofore recognized.¹¹

2. PRETENSE, QUARANTINE, AND PERMEABILITY

A natural alternative to Nguyen’s analysis treats the striving player as temporarily adopting winning, not as a genuine, noninstrumental, disposable end, but as a merely *pretended* one. Nguyen argues against this alternative by pointing out, first, that the motivational structure of someone who is merely “acting as if” they care about the goal of winning will focus on producing observable behaviors that mimic caring, where this may come apart from or even conflict

6 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 435, and *Games*, 34.

7 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 445.

8 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 437.

9 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 443.

10 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 447, 443.

11 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 445.

with actual caring-type thoughts.¹² Second, he points out that the motivational structure of a striving player need not revolve around or even be couched in terms of a game's fictional goals, such as rescuing the princess.¹³ Thus, both "acting as if" one wants to win and caring about fictional goals are at most optional for striving play. By contrast, he says, the goal of winning must occupy a "central and immediate role" within the striving player's psychology for the duration of game play in order for them to really play at all.¹⁴

The problem is that even if we grant that these psychological contrasts are apt, and that winning plays a dominant normative, functional, and phenomenological role in striving play, this does not suffice to establish winning as a genuine goal for the striving player; after all, this is just what a pretense theorist denies. On a pretense view, game play involves a complex interplay of real-world actions and mental states and corresponding fictional actions and mental states, linked by pretense. More specifically, the pretense theorist holds that I genuinely perform certain real-world actions that make it fictional that I accomplish (or fail to accomplish) certain game goals, and I pretend of those real-world actions and their effects that they have their prescribed in-game significance. Likewise, I pretend of my actual real-world psychological states that they are instantiations of psychological states that I really would have if the fiction were real.

Given this, the pretense theorist holds that we cannot read off the attitude and content of any individual psychological state, or cluster of states, in isolation. Rather, whether those actual states genuinely have a certain content depends on how they interact with the rest of the agent's psychology. Make-believe or simulated states are, by definition, "off-line," in the sense that they are *quarantined* from the rest of an agent's beliefs and actions.¹⁵ Thus, the theatergoer's racing heart does not constitute real fear, but only quasi-fear, because they do not believe they are in danger or flee the theater.¹⁶ Likewise, the striving player's very real "armpit sweats, jitters, and surge of adrenaline" do not constitute genuinely wanting to win, because the player does not undertake the full range of extra-game actions that would rationally support this goal.¹⁷

According to the pretense theorist, then, the striving player is just like the achievement player insofar as they both engage in the game's prescribed

12 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 447.

13 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 449.

14 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 448.

15 Goldman, "Empathy, Mind, and Morals"; Currie, "The Moral Psychology of Fiction"; Walton, "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime"; and Nichols and Stich, "A Cognitive Theory of Pretense."

16 Walton, "Fearing Fictions."

17 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 436.

pretense in order to make it fictional that they have achieved the game goals, because doing so will make it actually true that they have won. The only difference is that for the striving player, the scope of their pretense also extends to include their caring about winning.

If this analysis of striving play is coherent, Nguyen and the pretense theorist appear to be locked in a dialectical impasse. They agree that the real, enduring agent does not really care about winning. They agree in their descriptions of the player's psychological states construed narrowly, in terms of physiology, phenomenology, and local functionality. And they agree that the player's actions are locally coherent but appear to conflict with their enduring goals. They differ only in their descriptions of these states and actions and their explanation of the putative conflict. Nguyen explains it by positing a nested agent who genuinely wants to win and who pursues that goal by undertaking actual actions (e.g., capturing a knight) whose reality is constituted by the game's rules plus more basic actions (e.g., moving a plastic piece three squares), because performing those actions in that context helps fulfill actual but nested winning-conducive goals (e.g., launching a debilitating assault by surprising their opponent), where pursuing these goals in this context in turn facilitates a genuine long-term goal (e.g., social connection). By contrast, the pretense theorist posits a single agent who merely pretends to want to win, and who implements that pretense by undertaking real-world actions (e.g., moving a plastic piece three squares) that implement merely fictional actions (e.g., capturing a knight) in the service of merely fictional winning-conducive goals (e.g., launching a debilitating assault by surprising their opponent), because the immersive pretense of pursuing those goals facilitates a genuine long-term goal (e.g., social connection).

Given all that Nguyen and the pretense theorist agree on, it is unclear who has the burden of proof, or what proof they could provide. Moreover, it would seem that the pretense theorist has the advantage of parsimony, and that Nguyen could capture all the data he adduces while avoiding the Meinongian profligacy of positing multiple agents by recasting the "motivational two-step" of striving play in terms of functional and phenomenological immersion in a merely pretended goal of winning.

I suspect that many will be tempted by this route. However, I would urge Nguyen to hold fast to the idea that winning is a temporary but genuine, non-instrumental goal for the striving player. But I advocate this option because I reject an assumption that both Nguyen and the pretense theorist endorse: that the local motivational structure of striving play is robustly *quarantined* from the enduring motivations of real life.

The pretense theorist holds that a mental state like quasi-fear constitutes a mere simulation because it is quarantined from the enduring agent's broader network of beliefs. Similarly, Nguyen holds that the goal of winning belongs only to the nested game agent because it is quarantined from the enduring agent's broader network of goals. According to him, striving play involves a "single-minded absorption" in which we "aggressively seal ourselves off from the vast majority of our usual ends and considerations."¹⁸ While playing, the temporary game agent is in total control; the enduring agent is only engaged via "background monitoring processes," lounging in the wings to intervene if things go too far awry.¹⁹ This is how games can be "morally transformative technologies" that "turn competition into cooperation" in shared pursuit of the experience of striving.²⁰

I agree that robust quarantine happens and that it is theoretically revealing. But I also think such "aggressive sealing off" is relatively rare. In my experience, even highly competent and engaged players are often attentive to external social relations throughout the course of play. Their real-life expectations, hopes, and worries about their own and other players' game-extrinsic psychologies affect the intuitive salience and attractiveness of in-game moves, strategic choices, and emotional responses in pervasive and nuanced ways. Likewise, their own in-game and extra-game goals operate in more direct competition and interaction than Nguyen's overseer model predicts. And in those cases where players do achieve single-minded, wholehearted immersion, it is not obvious that they have not temporarily slipped into achievement play.

These intimate interactions between internal and external motivational structures arise partly because our knowledge of other players' game-extrinsic psychologies helps us predict their in-game actions, and because we care about how game play affects their post-game attitudes. This much is arguably compatible with the nested model. But we also take our enduring selves to bear at least some *responsibility* for our game actions inherently, apart from their in- and post-game effects on other players. Thus, Brenda Romero's installation-art board game, *Train*, is designed to induce an experience of moral complicity as players realize that in efficiently moving yellow pieces across the board they are fictionally shipping prisoners to Holocaust concentration camps.²¹ At a smaller scale, one of my many reasons for hating Monopoly is that I do not like the agential mode of being "narcissistically bent toward the destruction of

18 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 440, 441.

19 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 443.

20 Nguyen, *Games*, 174.

21 Nguyen, *Games*, 103.

others for my own good,” even if I am confident that I can put that mode aside after playing.²² More specifically, the reason I do not like it is that my in-game behavior reveals something about my real character: that I am competent in, and able to deploy and even revel in, this agential mode. (And for that same reason, I do not like it when my kids enact it either.)

Nguyen focuses his analysis on highly formalized games with fixed, explicit rules and arbitrary goals. The permeability of the game-life boundary is underscored if we expand our purview to include more fluid games. Fluidity and permeability are especially palpable with children’s games, which often begin as spontaneous sandbox play and evolve into something more constrained and articulated, with as much energy invested in haggling over rules as in actual play. Adult players are especially likely to experience permeability and to feel and impute in-game responsibility while playing open-ended, interactive, role-playing games like *World of Warcraft*—with more pro-social players feeling more in-game control and responsibility, and with skilled, young, male gamers apparently being more likely to engage in anti-social game play.²³

I think the profile of quarantine and permeability with games closely parallels our engagement with fiction. Many readers of fiction regularly cultivate interpretive perspectives and attendant emotional and moral responses that differ markedly from those they would have if they encountered the same situations in real life; but at the same time, that interpretive flexibility also displays significant causal and normative limits, with different readers being more or less willing or able to bracket their real-world perspectives.²⁴ In both cases, I take the lack of robust quarantine plus the presence of constrained flexibility to suggest that our engagement with art often involves actually but temporarily trying on alternative modes, rather than merely pretending to do so.

However, acknowledging the permeability of the game-life boundary undermines quarantine as a criterion for demarcating a genuine interest in winning from a merely pretended or nested one. As Walton himself says:

It will not always be obvious whether and to what extent a competitor or spectator engages in make-believe. . . . [It] may not be evident even to the pretender herself. Perhaps in some instances there is no fact of the matter about whether a person is engaging in pretense.²⁵

22 Nguyen, *Games*, 90. Indeed, Monopoly originated as a game intended to drive home the moral and economic perils of landlording.

23 Banks and Bowman, “Avatars Are (Sometimes) People Too”; and Bowman, Schultheiss, and Schumann, “‘I’m Attached, and I’m a Good Guy/Gal!’”

24 Camp, “Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction.”

25 Walton, “‘It’s Only a Game!’” 82–83.

Indeed, if permeability is as pervasive as I take it to be, this cuts against any clear segregation of motivational structures as genuine or either pretended or nested. Some players clearly do sometimes achieve the sweet spot of "absorbed, thrilling play" just for the experience of struggle. But for many more of us, our motivational structure is considerably more unstable: sometimes we engage in striving play, sometimes we fall into achievement play despite ourselves, and often we experience that "peculiar double-consciousness" of motivations, which may be more or less "anxious" depending on our personalities and circumstances.²⁶

3. STABILITY AND SELFHOOD

Stepping back from the debate between nesting and pretense analyses, these observations about fluidity and permeability largely support Nguyen's core conclusion that a kind of "purposeful and managed agential disunity" is not merely common but advantageous in human agency.²⁷ Indeed, I think they press us to push that conclusion further.

Construing agency primarily in terms of enduring beliefs and goals motivates an analysis in which game players and fiction readers do not *really* change their minds, insofar as their temporarily dominant phenomenology and functionality are not properly integrated with their long-term, reflective attitudes. This gets something right: we do have cross-contextually stable concepts, beliefs, and goals, which we deploy in the course of planning and executing such myriad activities as making meals, buying houses, and building bridges and constitutions.²⁸

However, those stable attitudes do not exhaust who we are. More importantly, those long-term attitudes are formed, accessed, and revised in concert with intuitive dispositions to parse, prioritize, and respond to particular properties and possibilities as we encounter them within particular contexts. Where Nguyen emphasizes the role of intuitive *agential modes* in practical action, I have emphasized the role of intuitive cognitive *perspectives* in interpretation.²⁹ Both perspectives and agential modes are significantly more malleable than beliefs and goals as traditionally conceived. Moreover, both are partly, but only partly, under voluntary control, in a way that motivates an analogy with

26 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 445.

27 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 445.

28 Camp, "Logical Concepts and Associative Characterizations."

29 See eg., Camp, "Metaphor and That Certain 'Je Ne Sais Quoi,'" "Logical Concepts and Associative Characterizations," and "Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding."

gestalt perception: we can try to adopt or cast them off, but “getting” them is something that ultimately just happens. When it does, this makes a substantive phenomenological and functional difference, by activating an open-ended ability to “go on” in interpreting and responding to an indefinite range of further situations. By highlighting and fostering the flexibility of these intuitive, phenomenologically and functionally dominant aspects of our psychology, both games and fiction reveal human agency to be more “fluid and fleeting” than the traditional view maintains.³⁰

Nguyen treats agents as stable, robust selves armed with “libraries” or “Swiss Army knives” of “modular” agential modes.³¹ But given the permeability of agential fluidity, it might be more appropriate to think of persons as chameleons, morphing among modes of interpretation and action as they traverse disparate contexts. On this model, we develop selves by building repertoires of interpretation and action, within which beliefs and goals function as especially stable nodes. The locus of agency would then reside as much in one’s choices about which contexts to enter and which modes to cultivate as in one’s enduring, reflectively endorsed commitments or one’s moment-to-moment choices. And we would achieve selfhood not necessarily by subsuming our lives under extended teleological structures, but rather by integrating our repertoires for engagement into coherent characters whose contextual variations hang together in complex higher-order wholes.³²

I take it that this model is very much in the spirit of Nguyen’s overall view, but that it moves at least one step further away from the traditional picture of autonomous rational liberalism. Applied to game play, it may even point in the opposite direction, by suggesting that the primary locus of agential stability resides not in an enduring agent who constructs a nested, winning-obsessed game agent as a means to fulfilling a long-term goal like social connection. Rather, agential stability resides *in the game itself*, precisely because and to the extent that the game constitutes a crystallized frame for “inscribing” and “storing” a well-defined agential mode.³³

Here again, I take games to exhibit a close analogy with fictions, along with other species of interpretive frame, like metaphors and slurs, which crystallize perspectives.³⁴ Like interpretive frames in general, games schematize—or

30 Nguyen, *Games*, 79.

31 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 426, 457, and *Games*, 86, 89.

32 Camp, “Wordsworth’s Prelude, Poetic Autobiography, and Narrative Constructions of the Self.”

33 Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” 427.

34 Camp, “Metaphor and That Certain ‘Je Ne Sais Quoi,’” “Showing, Telling, and Seeing,” “Slurring Perspectives,” and “Imaginative Frames for Scientific Inquiry.”

"sculpt"—an otherwise amorphous mode of engagement in simpler, more discrete terms. More specifically, like mantras—such as "He's just not that into you," "What would Jesus do?" or "It's the economy, stupid"—games offer concrete, tangible touchstones for action that can be accessed by multiple agents across multiple contexts.³⁵ By functioning to coordinate intuitive engagement in ways that we can try to deploy but that ultimately function intuitively and beneath the level of voluntary control, both games and interpretive frames constitute powerful "social technologies," which can be used for good and for ill.³⁶

4. LEARNING AND LIFE

These observations—about the "flexible and fleeting" quality of agency in general, about the permeable boundary between games and life, and about frames as interpretive stabilizers—also push us to adopt more cautionary versions of Nguyen's lessons about how playing games helps us learn about life.

Nguyen argues that games are "yoga for your agency" in at least three ways.³⁷ First, playing a variety of games can enrich our practical resources by augmenting our *repertoire* of agential modes. Second, it can train us to be *flexible* in choosing goals and agential modes. And third, engaging specifically in *aesthetic striving play* "fosters a special form of agential fluidity, where we enter into, and then step back from, the narrowly practical state" of game play.³⁸ Here, once again, I find Nguyen's case for games' agency-building potential to be generally persuasive but overly tidy. Nguyen cautions that the lessons offered by games are contingent: games are "a resource for autonomy development, not a guarantee. . . . You can misuse games, just as you can misuse Jane Austen."³⁹ However, I think that acknowledging the permeability between games and life, and the variety in formalization among games, reveals the hazards of misuse to be considerably more subtle and pervasive than he acknowledges.

At the first order, there is the risk of habituation. Like fictions, games inculcate open-ended patterns of attention and response that can linger even if we intend to indulge them only temporarily and instrumentally, and even if we abstract away from their particular contents.⁴⁰ Thus, just as a researcher might intend to read *Lolita* merely in order to gain a better understanding of

35 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 438.

36 Nguyen, *Games*, 1.

37 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 458.

38 Nguyen, *Games* 216.

39 Nguyen, *Games*, 92.

40 Camp, "Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction."

pedophilia but inadvertently end up more disposed to notice and interpret tween girls' pubescent features in sexual terms, so might a "good-hearted agent" intend to play Monopoly simply to placate their whining child or to predict the scheming of real estate moguls but end up genuinely more disposed to notice opportunities for exploiting other people's financial vulnerabilities.⁴¹

To combat habituation, we need a form of agency that is not just fluid, but actively flexible: one that enables us to "apply [our agential] inventory in the right circumstances."⁴² The problem is that deploying an active, flexible agency requires selecting an agential mode that appropriately matches our goals and circumstances. But lurking beneath the risk of habituation into agential modes we reflectively reject lurks the deeper problem that we are often unclear or confused about which agential mode really is appropriate, given our goals and circumstances. Worse, it may be indeterminate what our goals and circumstances themselves really are. Games are satisfying because they set us right-sized goals in preestablished harmony with their environments. Insofar as they are explicit and formalized, with fixed goals and tightly sculpted agential modes, they obviate the need to form those goals or develop those modes for ourselves. Abstract, highly restricted games like chess define precise grids of interlocking choice points, with little room for rational deviation. At the limit, games like War or Chutes and Ladders offer no agential choice, but merely a narrative and phenomenology of striving. But this means that the sort of flexibility we gain by playing even a wide variety of games may not just fail to foster but actively hinder the development of an accurately perceptive and appropriately responsive species of agency.

One tempting way to manage the mess of life is to stick to our default modes of interpretation and action; after all, their success in getting us this far constitutes some evidence that we have accurately assessed our circumstances and selected commensurately effective perspectives and modes for handling them. However, this comforting complacency may itself be borne of myopia: we may be ignoring complexities we *should* notice, or failing to appreciate alternative values and strategies we could embrace. Open-minded exploration of the sort fostered by games and fictions is indeed the best antidote to such complacency. But it carries its own risk: of being seduced into modes that appear satisfying precisely because they are stable and schematic.⁴³

Nguyen is deeply insightful about the risks of such "gamification." Much as we can fall into exporting particular open-ended perspectival patterns of

41 The term "good-hearted agent" is Nguyen's (*Games*, 91).

42 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 458.

43 Camp, "Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration."

attention and response even while carefully bracketing a game or fiction's specific contents, so can we fall into exporting a more generalized assumption of "value clarity" even while bracketing the particular modes of the games we play.⁴⁴ Here again, highly formalized, "teleologically crisp" games like chess are especially seductive.⁴⁵ But even more amorphous games like *World of Warcraft* foster the primordial fantasy that one's environment contains a hidden meaning that, once unlocked, determines a right action.

In this vein, game designer Reed Berkowitz argues that the political conspiracy theory QAnon is so pernicious because it exploits three sources of cognitive reward that game designers also tap into: apophenia, or promiscuous pattern recognition; the phenomenology of "eureka!" insight; and social competition and validation.⁴⁶ But where actual game designers carefully channel these factors to keep players moving toward an ultimate goal that coherently integrates the game's environment, obstacles, and abilities, QAnon is "AI with a group-think engine," inciting unfettered apophenia in service of an alternate-reality-creating pyramid scheme. In this case, it is precisely the fluid, evolving nature of gamification that makes it so seductive and self-perpetuating, and hence so destructive when unleashed on the real world.

Ultimately, Nguyen's true hero for agential calisthenics is not games, but striving play. And indeed, striving play promises to provide a distinctively powerful tool for autonomy development, because it trains us to treat not just the various goals of the games we play, but also winning itself as a disposable end. However, precisely because winning is so cognitively and socially alluring, and because striving play requires a locally dominant focus on winning, striving play is also quite precarious. The risk of falling into achievement play always looms, and with it the risk of actively hindering our autonomy by blinding us to other, more profound but messier and more organic values.

Our last, best hope for building autonomy through games is *aesthetic* striving play: cultivating a form of "impractical and unfiltered attention" that staves off achievement play while nurturing deep open mindedness, in a way that can then equip us to notice subtle, neglected properties and values as we stumble across them in life.⁴⁷ Even here, though, it is not obvious that the type of disengaged self-reflection that characterizes the aesthetic attitude readily transfers to the type that is relevant for autonomous, critical self construction in life. As Richard Posner notes in his critique of Nussbaum's "moral imagination,"

44 Nguyen, *Games*, 199; see also "The Seductions of Clarity."

45 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 457.

46 Berkowitz, "A Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon."

47 Nguyen, *Games*, 118.

aesthetic sophistication and wholehearted empathetic fictional engagement can serve as welcome escapes from an unpleasant reality and are all too compatible with real-life moral myopia and perversion.⁴⁸ So too, cultivating an aesthetic appreciation of the harmony between one's experience and environment within a game is not just compatible with but can actively hamper investment in more ethically pressing dimensions of assessment. Moreover, aesthetic reflection is arguably easiest and most rewarding to achieve with highly formalized, tightly sculpted games; but, if so, this very formalization makes transferring the aesthetic attitude from the game to practical engagement with messy reality that much more challenging. Thus, I take it that the risks of disuse and misuse from games for autonomy development are not just possible in principle, but pressing in practice.

As human agents, we need to be both fluid and persistent in our modes of engagement. As Nguyen demonstrates, games exploit and foster both of these capacities. Playing a rich variety of well-designed games, with the right attitude under the right circumstances, can expand and strengthen our agency in ways that other art forms and activities do not. But playing games offers no reliable recipe for crafting rich, sensitive, reflective persons. This should not surprise us: in real life—unlike games—there are no sure-fire recipes.

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