**Agency, Stability, and Permeability in "Games"**[1]

"Games and the Art of Agency" is a landmark article, backed by an important and engaging book. If they don't exactly inaugurate the philosophical study of games, they definitely level it up by a mile. While there is much to explore about what counts as a game, when games constitute art, and why they are aesthetically valuable, I want to focus on what they reveal about agency. Nguyen's analysis highlights a profound complexity in human motivation. I think it also thereby calls into question a traditional notion of selfhood – a notion that plays a crucial role in Nguyen's 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. By creating such a structure, a game designer invites players to exercise an *agential mode*: a pairing of a type of goal with a set of skills and patterns of attention to opportunities and obstacles for fulfilling it.

Human agency is characterized by a duality of limitation and flexibility: deploying one mode precludes deploying another, but we expand and refine our repertoire of modes over time, and we can (sometimes) choose which to activate at a time. Nguyen argues that games transform this duality into art, by "sculpting" (427) and "crystallizing" (432) agential modes in stable, tangible forms that focus attention and skills in precise, well-defined ways. Participating in a game's interlocking structure of goals, abilities and obstacles can be aesthetically rewarding, by inculcating a nuanced harmony between one's situation and abilities (430). The "clarity of purpose" this can provide, in a coherent environment where success is possible but not guaranteed, offers a kind of "existential balm" (456), as well as extrinsic rewards like exercise or social connection.

However, Nguyen argues, unlocking those rewards requires a "peculiar motivational two-step" (440), of coming to care about something we recognize to be pointless. All game play involves tackling artificial obstacles under arbitrary constraints in pursuit of the artificial goal that constitutes winning. Some players – achievement players – really want to win, and hence really care, albeit instrumentally, about scoring points or moving plastic pieces around on a board. But others – striving players – just want to engage in the struggle, either for its own intrinsic pleasure or as a means to some other end. However, playing is defined by trying to win; and so striving players must invert the ordinary structure of means-end motivation: they must (try to) win in order to play.

How can striving play be possible? Nguyen argues that it requires temporarily taking on winning as a genuine goal. Normatively, just as for the achievement player, the striving player's behavior must be guided by trying to win; and so functionally, in order to play well – or even to "really play" at all – those goals must dominate their motivational structure and attention. This much is compatible with winning being an instrumental goal, as it is for the achievement player whose ultimate interest lies in fame or fortune. However, many of the goals that ultimately motivate striving players, like aesthetic appreciation or conviviality, are "self-effacing": they cannot be pursued directly and "transparently" (441). This means, Nguyen thinks, that winning must become a *disposable end*: a goal that is genuine and non-instrumental, but adopted temporarily and voluntarily, because it

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is “partially detached from our normal ends” (435), 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” (*Games* 34).

Like instrumental ends, disposable ends in the service of self-effacing ulterior goals are not especially unusual: we regularly take up hobbies like knitting, kick-boxing, or cooking in the service of mental or physical health or social connection, or give guest lectures that require buying into largely arbitrary constraints. Nguyen argues that striving play’s “motivational two step” is more distinctive, because it can require not just turning one’s attention away from the ulterior goal and toward the implementing one, but actually shifting one’s motivational structure to include goals that conflict with one’s enduring ends. Thus, the ultimate goal of social connection may require a local goal of competitive domination (445). 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 (437); but it is reasonable to avoid acquiring additional game-relevant skills outside the game, if doing so would make it too easy to win.

To accommodate this divergence in motivational structures, Nguyen concludes, we need to posit a layered or “nested” agent (443). On the inside, dominating one’s practical rationality and phenomenology, is a game agent whole-heartedly and single-mindedly focused on winning; lurking the background is an “enduring agent” (447) who monitors the game agent’s performance “in an interestingly distanced way” (443). Such “purposeful and managed agential disunity” (445) in turn reveals human agency to be more “fluid” and “modular” than philosophers have recognized.

***2. Pretense, Quarantine and Permeability***

Nguyen considers several alternatives to treating winning as a genuine, non-instrumental, disposable end, among them the suggestion that the striving player merely pretends to care about winning. He points out that the motivational structure of someone who “acts as if” they care about a goal will aim at producing observable behaviors that mimic caring, rather than actual caring-type thoughts (447), and that the motivational structure of a striving player needn’t revolve around a game’s fictional goals, if any (449). Unlike both “acting as if” and fictional goals, the goal of winning must to occupy a “central and immediate role” for in the striving player’s psychology, for the duration of game play (448).

The crucial question, though, is whether the fact that winning plays a dominant normative, functional, and phenomenological role establishes that it is a genuine goal. And this is just what pretense theorist denies. On most pretense views, game play involves a complex interplay of real-world actions and mental states and fictional ones, linked by pretense. Thus, I genuinely perform real-world actions which make it fictional that I accomplish (or fail to accomplish) certain game goals (e.g. I actually move this plastic piece two spaces forward, which makes it fictional that I capture your bishop). I pretend of those real-world actions that they have their prescribed game significance (e.g. I pretend to have captured your bishop, and thereby launched a surprise attack, by moving my piece two spaces forward). And I pretend of my actual real-world psychological states that they are instantiations of states I would have if the fiction were real (e.g. I pretend of my pounding heart that it is anxiety about whether you will retaliate by taking my knight).

According to the pretense theorist, we cannot simply read off the attitude and content of an individual psychological state, or an interacting cluster of states, in isolation; rather, whether they are genuine depends on how they interact with the rest of the agent’s psychology. Make-believe or simulated states not genuine because they are “off-line”: quarantined from the rest of an agent’s beliefs and actions (Goldman 1992, Currie 1995, Walton 1997, Nichols and Stich 2000). Thus, the theatergoer’s racing heart does not constitute genuine

fear, but only quasi-fear, because they do not believe they are in danger or flee the theater (Walton 1978); likewise, the striving player's "armpit sweats, jitters, and surge of adrenaline" (436) do not constitute or demonstrate genuinely wanting to win at chess, because the player does not undertake the full range of extra-game actions that would rationally support this goal, like reading up on chess strategy.

On a pretense model, then, an achievement player really wants to win, and engages in the game's prescribed pretense in order to make it fictional that they have achieved the game goals, because doing so makes it actually true that they have won. A striving player merely pretends to want to win: their winning-type thoughts fall within the scope of their pretense. But otherwise, their pretense is the same as the achievement player's.

If this is right, then Nguyen and the pretense theorist appear to be locked in a dialectical impasse. They agree that the enduring agent doesn't really care about winning, but instead about the experience of struggle, perhaps as a means toward aesthetic reward, conviviality, or exercise. They agree in their descriptions of the striving player's psychological states narrowly construed, in terms of their physiology, phenomenology, and local functionality. They agree that the player's actions are locally coherent but appear to conflict with their enduring goals. Nguyen explains the conflict by positing a nested agent who genuinely wants to win, and who pursues that goal by undertaking actual actions (like capturing a knight) whose reality is constituted by the game rules plus more basic actions (like moving a plastic piece three squares), because those actions help to fulfill winning-conducive goals (like deceiving one's opponent) that the enduring agent may not actually endorse but permits because doing so in this context facilitates long-term genuine goals (like conviviality). The pretense theorist explains the conflict by positing a single agent who merely pretends to want to win, and who implements that pretense by actually deciding to undertake real-world actions (like moving a plastic piece three squares) that implement fictional actions (like capturing a knight) in the service of winning-conducive fictional goals (like deceiving one's opponent), because the pretense of pursuing them facilitates a long-term goal (like social bonding).

Given their agreement, who has the burden of proof, and what proof could they provide? It seems that Nguyen can capture all the phenomenal data he wants, while avoiding Meinongian profligacy, if he recasts the "motivational two step" of striving play in terms of functional and phenomenological immersion in a pretended goal of winning.

While I suspect many will want to go this way, I think Nguyen should hold on to the startling idea that winning is a genuine but temporary, non-instrumental goal for the striving player. But this is because I reject an assumption endorsed by both Nguyen and the pretense theorist: that the local motivational structure of striving play is robustly quarantined from the enduring motivations of real life. For him, games are "morally transformative technologies" that "turn competition into cooperation" in shared pursuit of the experience of striving (*Games* 174). Striving play involves a "single-minded absorption" (440) in which we "aggressively seal ourselves off from the vast majority of our usual ends and considerations" (441). While playing, the temporary game agent is in total control; the enduring agent merely engages in "background monitoring processes" (443), waiting to step in if things go too far awry. Thus, much as 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, 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.

I agree that robust quarantine happens. But I also think it is relatively rare. In my experience, even highly 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; and their 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, whole-hearted immersion, it is not obvious that they haven't slipped into achievement play.

These intimate interactions between the two 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. But we also take our enduring selves to bear at least some responsibility for our game actions even apart from 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 (*Games* 103). At a smaller scale, one of my many reasons for hating *Monopoly* is that I don't like the agential mode of being "narcissistically bent toward the destruction of others for my own good" (*Games* 90), even if I am confident that I can put it aside after playing The reason I don't 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 reason, I don't 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 view to include games which are themselves more fluid. This is especially palpable with children's games, which (in my experience) often begin as spontaneous sandbox play and evolve into something more constrained and articulated, often 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, character-based games like *World of Warcraft* (Banks and Bowman 2016), with more pro-social players feeling more control and responsibility (and with skilled, young male gamers apparently being more likely to engage in anti-social game play) (Bowman et al 2012).

I think the situation here closely parallels our engagement with fiction, where many readers regularly cultivate interpretive perspectives and attendant emotional and moral responses, which differ markedly from those they would have if they encountered the same situations in real life; but where that interpretative flexibility displays significant causal and normative limits, with different readers being more or less willing or able to bracket their real-world perspectives (Camp 2017). In both cases, I take the lack of robust quarantine plus constrained flexibility to suggest that in engaging with art, we actually but temporarily try on alternative modes rather than merely pretending to do so.

However, to the extent that the boundary between genuine and nested agents, or genuine and pretended attitudes, is indeed permeable, this undermines quarantine as a criterion for demarcating genuine concern for winning. As Walton says (2015, 82-3),

> 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.

Where the pretense theorist classifies individual or local collections of attitudes as pretended, Nguyen posits an entire distinct agent – a complex, holistically integrated motivational structure with its own goals, priorities, and agential modes. This raises the evidential and metaphysical bar for him, relative to a pretense account. However, if permeability is as pervasive as I take it to be, it cuts against any clear segregation of motivational

structures. It is clear that some players 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 fall into achievement play; often we experience that "peculiar double-consciousness" (445) of motivations, which may be more or less "anxious" depending on our personalities and circumstances.

***3. Stability and Selfhood***

Stepping back from the debate between nesting and pretense, these observations bolster Nguyen's core conclusions: that game play showcases a kind of agential fluidity that characterizes human agency in general; and that "purposeful and managed agential disunity" is not merely normal, but advantageous (445). Indeed, I would go a step further: by focusing on the depth of immersion we can achieve through highly formalized games, Nguyen risks underplaying the fluidity of our engagement with both formal and informal games, and in life more generally. Where he treats agents as stable, robust selves (*Games* 86) armed with or "Swiss Army knives" (*Games* 89) or "libraries" (457) of "modular" agential modes (426), it might be more appropriate to think of us as chameleons, morphing among styles of being as we traverse diverse contexts.

If we construe agency primarily in terms of enduring beliefs and goals, it appears plausible that game players and fiction readers do not really change their minds, because their temporarily dominant phenomenology and functionality are not properly integrated with their long-term, reflective attitudes. There is clearly something right about this. Western, Romantic thought in particular valorizes purposeful agents striving in pursuit of lifelong ambitions (Camp 2011); but cross-contextually stable concepts, beliefs, and goals really do guide many of our actions (Camp 2015).

However, those stable attitudes do not exhaust who we are. In particular, they are formed, accessed, and revised in concert with intuitive dispositions to parse, prioritize, and respond to particular properties and possibilities as we encounter them. Where Nguyen emphasizes the role of intuitive agential modes in practical action, I have emphasized the role of intuitive cognitive perspectives in interpretation (Camp 2006, 2015, 2018). Both agential modes and perspectives are significantly more contextually 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 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" (*Games* 79) than the traditional view maintains.

In place of the enduring, purposeful rational agent, we might embrace a model that construes agency and selfhood in terms of repertoires of interpretation and action, with beliefs and goals as especially stable functional nodes within those repertoires. The locus of agency resides as much in one's choices about which contexts to enter, and so which modes to cultivate, as in one's long-term, reflectively endorsed commitments or active, moment-to-moment decisions. We achieve selfhood, not necessarily by subsuming our lives under stable teleological structures, but by integrating our repertoires of engagement into coherent characters: ones whose contextual variations hang together in higher-order, often highly complex, wholes (Camp 2011).

I take it that this (admittedly non-standard) model is very much in the spirit of Nguyen's overall view, but takes it at least one step further. Applied to game play, it may even point in the opposite direction, by suggesting that agential stability often resides not in an enduring agent who opts to construct a nested, winning-obsessed game

agent as a means to fulfill a long-term goal like conviviality. Rather, it resides *in the game* itself, precisely because and to the extent that a game constitutes a crystallized frame for "inscribing" and "storing" (427) a well-defined agential mode.

Here again, I take games to exhibit a close analogy with fictions, metaphors, mantras, and other species of interpretive frame, which crystallize perspectives (Camp 2006, 2008, 2019). Like interpretive frames in general, games schematize – or "sculpt" (438) – an otherwise amorphous mode of engagement in simpler, more discrete terms. And like mantras, such as 'He's just not that into you,' 'What would Jesus do?' or 'It's the economy, stupid,' they offer concrete, tangible touchstones for action which can be accessed by multiple agents across multiple contexts. By functioning to coordinate intuitive engagement in ways that we can try to deploy but that ultimately function beneath the level of voluntary control, both games and interpretive frames constitute powerful "social technologies" (*Games* 1), which can be used for good and for ill.

***4. Learning and Life***

These observations – about the "flexible and fleeting" quality of agency in general, about the often porous boundary between game and real-life agency, and about frames' stabilizing function – support modulated versions of Nguyen's lessons for what we learn by playing games.

Nguyen argues that games are "yoga for your agency" (458), or tools for building active, flexible agents, in several ways. Playing a variety of games can enrich our practical resources by augmenting our repertoire of agential modes. It can also train us to be flexible in choosing our goals and agential modes. Finally, 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 (*Games* 216). Nguyen stresses that games are "a resource for autonomy development, not a guarantee…You can misuse games, just as you can misuse Jane Austen" (*Games* 92). Here, once again, while I find Nguyen's case for games' agency-building potential persuasive, I also think that acknowledging the permeability between games and life, and the variety among games, reveals the hazards of misuse to be more subtle and pervasive than he acknowledges.

At the first order, there is the risk of habituation. Just as a researcher might intend to read *Lolita* merely in order to understand pedophilia but inadvertently end up 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 anticipate the scheming of real estate moguls (*Games* 91), but end up disposed to notice opportunities for exploiting other people's financial vulnerabilities. Both fictions and games, that is, inculcate open-ended patterns of attention and response, which can linger even if we intend to indulge them only temporarily and instrumentally, and even if we abstract away from their particular contents (Camp 2017).

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" (458). But the obstacle to active flexibility is not just that we are so easily sucked into modes of response we reflectively reject. At a deeper level, we are often unclear or confused about which mode is appropriate given our goals and circumstances. Worse, it may be indeterminate what our goals and circumstances really are. Games are satisfying because they set right-sized goals in pre-established harmony with their environments. Insofar as they are explicit and formalized, with fixed goals and tightly sculpted modes, they obviate the need to form those goals or develop those modes for ourselves. Abstract, narrow, complex games like chess set out a precise grid of interlocking rational choice points, with little room for deviation. At the limit, games like *War* and *Chutes and Ladders* offer no agential choice at all, but merely the 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 help, but actually hinder the development of an accurately perceptive, appropriately responsive 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've assessed our circumstances accurately and selected commensurately appropriate modes. However, this comforting complacency may itself be borne of myopia: we may fail to notice the complexities we're ignoring, or to appreciate the alternative values and strategies we could embrace. Open-minded exploration, of the sort that games and fictions foster, is the best antidote to such complacency (Camp forthcoming). But it carries its own risk: of being seduced into modes that seem satisfying only because they are so stable and schematic.

Nguyen is deeply insightful about the risks of "gamification." Much as we can fall into exporting open-ended perspectival patterns of attention and response while carefully bracketing a game or fiction's particular contents, so can we fall into exporting a more generalized assumption of "value clarity" while bracketing the particular goals and modes of the games we play (*Games* 199). Here again, highly formalized, "teleologically crisp" games (457) are especially seductive. But even more amorphous games like *World of Warcraft* foster the primordial fantasy that one's environment contains a hidden meaning which, once unlocked, determines a right action.

Thus, the game designer Reed Berkowitz (2020) argues that QAnon is so pernicious because it exploits three of the same sources of cognitive reward that game designers also tap into: apophenia, or promiscuous pattern-recognition; the phenomenology of self-induced 'Eureka!' insight; and social competition and validation. But where actual game designers carefully channel apophenia to keep players moving toward an ultimate goal which coherently integrates its environment, obstacles, and abilities, QAnon is "AI with a group-think engine," inciting unfettered apophenia in service of an alternate-reality-creating pyramid scheme. Here, it is precisely the fluid, evolving nature of the gamification that makes it so seductive and self-perpetuating.

Nguyen's real hero is not games, but striving play. And striving play does seem to be a distinctively powerful tool for autonomy development, because it trains us to treat not just the various goals of the games we play but 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, it can be difficult to avoid falling into achievement play – if there even is a fact of the matter about which type of play we're engaged in. And here too, achievement play can not just fail to help, but actively hinder autonomy by blinding us to other, more organic values.

Our last, best hope is aesthetic striving play: cultivating a form of "impractical and unfiltered attention" (*Games* 118) that staves off achievement play while nurturing deep open-mindedness, which can then equip us to notice subtle, neglected properties and values as we stumble across them in life. Even here, though, it is not obvious that the type of disengaged self-reflection that characterizes the aesthetic attitude transfers to the type relevant for autonomous, critical self-construction. As Richard Posner (1997) notes in his critique of Nussbaum's "moral imagination," aesthetic sophistication and investment are all too compatible with real-life ethical myopia and perversion. Likewise, cultivating an appreciation for harmony between one's experience and environment can hamper investment in more ethically pressing dimensions of assessment. Moreover, to the extent that aesthetic reflection is easiest and most rewarding with highly formalized, tightly sculpted games, transferring the aesthetic attitude to ordinary practical engagement will be that much more challenging.

As human agents, we need to be both fluid and persistent. As Nguyen demonstrates, games exploit and foster both. Playing a rich variety of well-designed games, with the right attitude under the right circumstances, can help expand and strengthen our agency, in ways other artforms and activities don't. It's not surprising that playing games offers no reliable recipe for crafting rich, sensitive, reflective persons. In real life – unlike games – there are no (well, few) sure-fire recipes.

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