Games and the Art of Agency

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To some, games are a trivial endeavor; they are merely a way to relieve boredom and idle away the time. Even worse, games might seem like egotistical indulgences in the pleasures of competition, victory, and status. After all, what could possibly be the point in taking on these arbitrary rules and goals? What could be the point of all that aimless struggle? The answer, I will suggest, is that the rules and goals of games are not arbitrary at all. They are actually a way of specifying particular modes of agency for the player to adopt. This is what makes games a distinctive art form. Designers of such games do not simply create the gaming environments and obstacles. They designate goals and abilities for the player; they shape the agential skeleton which the player will inhabit during the game. Game designers work in the medium of agency. And players, when they play games, are fluidly taking on alternate agencies in a controlled and limited fashion.

Consider what is, to my mind, a leading candidate for artful game design: Kathryn Hymes and Hakan Seyalioglu's *Sign*, a product of the avant-garde wing of role-playing games. It's a live-action role-playing

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game about inventing language. The game is based on a true story. In the 1970s, Nicaragua had no sign language; deaf children were deeply isolated. Eventually, the government brought together deaf children from across the country to form an experimental school with the goal of teaching those children to lip read. Instead, the children spontaneously invented their own sign language. In *Sign*, you play as one of those students. The game assigns each player a backstory and gives each player an inner truth that they need to tell someone. For example: "I'm afraid one day I'll be like my parents," and "I'm afraid [my cat] Whiskers thinks I've left her." The game is played in total silence. The only way to communicate is through the signs that the players will invent. There are three rounds. In each round, each player invents a single sign and teaches it to the other players; then all the players attempt to have a freeform conversation. Those first signs get used and modified; new signs evolve spontaneously from older signs. Communication happens painfully and slowly, with the occasional marvelous breakthrough. Every time a player feels misunderstood or that they do not understand another player, they take a marker and make a "compromise mark" on their hand. The experience of the game is remarkable; it is intense, absorbed, frustrating, and surprisingly emotional. But to have that experience, the player must temporarily commit to the goal of expressing their particular inner truth. They must absorb themselves in the practical details of communicating inside the severe restrictions of the game.

Games of this sort, I claim, work in a distinctive medium and can achieve distinctive effects. But much recent discussion has treated games as a subcategory within some other, well-established artistic category. Grant Tavinor (2009) argues that computer games are a kind of art because they are a kind of fiction; Berys Gaut (2010: 140–51, 224–43) treats computer games as a new form of cinema: digital interactive cinema. Dominic Lopes (2010: 103–20) treats computer game art as a type of interactive computer art, as one might find in a museum. And Ian Bogost (2010) and Mary Flanagan (2013) have praised those games that perform some sort of socially worthy communicative function. Flanagan, for example, focuses on the category of "serious games," which perform various sorts of socially and politically critical roles, and argues that they are a close relative of avant-garde conceptual art.

I do not deny that games can be valuable in these familiar ways. *Sign*, certainly, can be usefully analyzed in such terms. But there is something else at which *Sign* excels, and which none of these theories can quite

capture.[1] When playing *Sign*, sometimes all the fiction falls away and one is simply absorbed in the instrumental tasks of the game. In my first playing, we had developed signs for "home," "love," and "parents." I was trying to communicate my inner truth, which was that I wanted to run away from home. The peak experience of the game was, for me, trying to somehow communicate concepts like fear, isolation, and flight, and inventing the signs I needed along the way. At that moment in the game, I was not involved in imagining myself into an alternate world or reflecting on what I had learned about society. I was simply involved in the task of improvising new signs for communication within the bounds of the rules. The various experiences of frustration, isolation, invention, and epiphany came from my absorption in the instrumental tasks at hand.

That distinctive gaming experience is accessible by players only if they give themselves to the goals of the game—only if they try, with some degree of commitment, to win. This, I will argue, requires that we submerge ourselves in these alternative in-game agencies—that we take on these temporary ends as something like final ends. We have to induce in ourselves some sort of gripping interest in achieving the goals of the game in order to access the particular experiences on offer. The fact that we can achieve this kind of absorption during game play reveals something rather astonishing about us. Our agency turns out to be significantly more fluid and modular than we might have thought. Games highlight our ability to substantially, voluntarily, and quickly manipulate aspects of our own agency. This is not true for all game play and all game players. Some game play is quite motivationally straightforward. If I play poker for money, then my in-game goals and my extra-game goals align. I want to win because winning will make me money. But in order to play games for the experience of practical engagement, we must be capable of doing something more motivationally tangled. We must be able to induce ourselves to care about an arbitrary goal simply for the sake of the experience of struggling toward it.

These considerations will offer a reply to the accusations about the relative unimportance of games. This accusation arises especially around

1. My line of argument is somewhat aligned, in spirit, with those scholars who call themselves ludologists and argue that games are a unique category. I differ from them in thinking that certain general notions from the study of artworks can, in fact, be useful. I've offered a general overview of the narratology vs. ludology debate in Nguyen 2017c, along with a more detailed survey of the theoretical approaches outlined above. For interestingly parallel discussions, see Graeme Kirkpatrick's (2011) and Daniel Vella's (2016) application of continental and critical theoretic approaches to the aesthetics of game play.

games of the traditional sort, where there are rules and artificial goals and one tries very hard to win. For some, this means that games cannot be of significant value. For example, media critic Andrew Darley (2000; quoted in Lopes 2010: 117) condemns video games for offering only "surface play" and "direct sensorial stimulation." Says Darley: "Computer games are machine-like: they solicit intense concentration from the player who is caught up in their mechanisms . . . leaving little room for reflection other than an instrumental type of thinking that is more or less commensurate with their own workings." The same anxiety recurs, in a subtler fashion, in many contemporary game scholars, who defend the value of games by showing how they can offer something beyond merely instrumental challenges—like, say, by representing the world or making arguments (Bogost 2010: 1–64; Sharp 2015: 77–97). Implicit in these various maneuvers is the idea that instrumental play—the play of skills and clearly defined goals—is somehow immature or pointless.

I will argue, instead, that the very objects of suspicion—the artificial rules, the arbitrary goal, and the player's dedication to winning—are actually central to what makes games both a unique art form and a valuable tool for human self-development.[2] Game designers set particular rules and goals because their temporary adoption will bring about certain experiences, and a player can take up these rules and goals for the sake of those experiences. These rules and goals turn out to be basic artistic resources for the game designer. The specificity of rules, and our fluid capacity to temporarily adopt other ends, is what makes it possible for game designers to inscribe particular alternate agencies into games, and for players to take on these agencies.

Thinking about games and agency will yield several rewards. We will learn about the distinctive art form that is games and about the aesthetic values they can support. We will also learn something surprising about the structure of human agency and our capacities to modulate it. Our agency will turn out to be modular and moderately fluid. We have the capacity to set up temporary agencies, layered within our larger agency, and submerge ourselves within them. Games turn out to be a technique to

2. This article will not take up the discussion of whether games can count as "art." That question has been taken up elsewhere, and answered to my satisfaction in the positive (Smuts 2005; Tavinor 2009, 2010; Sharp 2015). If the reader is not satisfied with those accounts, they may, for any occurrence of a claim that games are art, instead substitute the claim that games are works, which are art-like in some significant aspects. See also Rough 2017 for an argument why games cannot be art, and Ridge 2018 for a convincing response.

inscribe and transmit sculpted agencies. They let us *communicate* modes of agency, and store them. Games let us create an archive of agencies.

Striving Play and Achievement Play

The best place to start is Bernard Suits's ([1978] 2014) analysis of games, which will highlight the motivational peculiarity of game playing. Let's start with Suits's simplified "portable version" of his definition: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles (43). For example: in a marathon, the point isn't simply to get to the finish line. A runner usually doesn't actually care about being at that particular point in space, in and of itself. We know because they won't take shortcuts or a taxi. The point is to get there under certain limitations. Suits contrasts game playing with what he calls "technical activity"—that is, the ordinary practice of using efficient means to reach an independently valuable end. With game playing, we instead take on an arbitrary end for the sake of the means they force us through. Getting a ball through a stupid little basket has no independent value on its own; we just take up the goal of making baskets against opposition in order to play basketball. Notice that Suits's theory captures a broad range of phenomena: video games, board games, team sports, mountain climbing, hiking, and even jazz and academic research could be engaged with in such a way.

Suits took himself to be offering a complete account of games and game playing. For this he has been roundly criticized, since there are many aspects and types of game playing that do not conform to Suits's theory. Many practices of role-playing—narrative oriented tabletop role-playing games, like *Fiasco*, and wholly narrative computer games, such as *The Stanley Parable*—seem to involve no obstacles at all. I take these criticisms to be correct and thus reject Suits's claim that his definition is complete. I suggest, instead, that we follow in the spirit of Roger Caillois ([1961] 2001) and be pluralists of play. I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming) that there are at least two distinct forms of game play—the Suitsian play of challenges and obstacles, on the one hand, and fictive, imaginative make-believe play, on the other hand. Suits's analysis will then turn out to be, not a complete definition of 'game', but simply an insightful description of one of the forms of game play. Though I am not committed to a Wittgensteinean view about the indefinability of the term 'game', my analysis is compatible with such a view. My interest here is in delineating a particular sort of human activity and a particular class of artifact because

they are interesting and explanatorily powerful. I am not attempting to provide an accurate reconstruction of linguistic practice.

The Suitsian analysis is compatible with a wide range of interests. One might be playing for the sake of winning. Let's call this *achievement play*. An achievement player either wants the win for its own sake, or for something that follows from winning, like goods and money. Professional poker players who play for money, Olympic athletes who play for honor, and people who play simply to win are all achievement players.[3] Alternately, one might be playing for the sake of going through the struggle to win. Let's call that *striving play*. An achievement player plays to win; a striving player temporarily acquires an interest in winning for the sake of the struggle. Note that these two orientations are actually compatible. One player may have both interests to varying degrees and so be engaged in both types of play—as I might, when I play poker both for the money and the joy of the struggle. But the motivational inversion of striving play is, to my eyes, the most interesting possibility raised by the Suitsian analysis.

There are many reasons one might be interested in striving play. One could be interested in it just for the sake of doing something difficult, or for physical or mental fitness, or for the experience. Note that the distinction between achievement play and striving play does not map onto the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. It is possible to engage in achievement play for the intrinsic value of winning, and possible to do it for the extrinsic value of what follows from winning, like money or honor. Similarly, it is possible to engage in striving play for the intrinsic value of engaging in the activity, or to do it for the extrinsic value of what follows from the activity—like running marathons for the sake of one's health. Striving play is not marked by the intrinsic value of the activity; it is marked by the inverted relationships between means and ends within the bounds of the game.

Perhaps a mundane example will make the category of striving play more plausible. I once took up racquetball with my spouse for the sake of our health and enjoyment. I don't have any particular interest in beating my spouse at racquetball. In fact, it would be rather unpleasant if

3. I will continue to use the language of pursuing a "win" for brevity's sake, but please take this to indicate the wide variety of successes conditions for game play that Suits illuminates. For example, in a tennis volley, there is no possibility of winning; one is merely pursuing keeping the volley going as long as possible before the inevitable failure. An achievement player in this case would be one for whom value attached to actually successfully keeping the volley going for as long as possible.

one of us consistently beat the other. But I can induce in myself an interest in winning for the sake of the health benefits of running around after that ball. We can tell that my enduring interest here isn't really in winning, by considering my long-term strategic manipulations of my ability to win. Suppose, for instance, that my wife and I are evenly matched and consistently having exciting, challenging games. Suppose that a friendly racquetball pro offers to give some free lessons to me, and only me. If I were an achievement player, I should certainly take those lessons. But it seems quite understandable if I were to, instead, refuse those lessons on the grounds that it would render my games with my spouse unbalanced and therefore unenjoyable. Though I can only enjoy our games when I pursue winning wholeheartedly during the game, my extra-game decisions reflect a decided disinterest in the actual goal of maximizing my wins. My decision to avoid those lessons seems eminently reasonable—but it can only be reasonable if striving play is possible.

Also, consider the category of what we might call *stupid games*. Stupid games have the following characteristics: first, they are only fun if you try to win; and second, the most fun part is when you fail. There are a great many stupid games, including many drinking games, the children's game of telephone, and the game of bag on your head. The latter is a party game where everybody puts a brown paper grocery bag on their head and then stumbles blindly around the room, trying to take the bags off of other people's heads. When somebody takes the bag off your head, you're out. At some point, there is only one person stumbling around the room with a bag still on their head, while everybody else watches, trying to suppress laughter. That lone person, of course, is the winner, and the best part of the game is watching how long it takes them to figure out that they've won. Consider also a game like *Twister*, in which you try to keep in balance as long as you can, but the funniest part is when everybody collapses on top of each other. To have the desired experience—hilarious failure—one must pursue success, but success isn't the point. The desired experience is failure on the way to success, but that failure is only entertaining when the pursuit of success was, in some sense, genuine. Stupid games cannot be properly played by achievement players, but only by striving players. Stupid games make sense only if striving play is possible.

An Aesthetics of Striving

But stupid games are not the point of our inquiry; they are a merely blunt example to demonstrate the actuality of striving play. Why would we

engage in striving play, beyond such silly endeavors? Here's one comprehensible reason: we often engage in striving play for the aesthetic experience of our own activity.

The aesthetic account of striving play is important to our inquiry in several ways. First, it will be a particularly illustrative case of the peculiar motivational inversion of striving play. When we engage in aesthetic striving play, we are taking on temporary ends for the sake of the intrinsic value of the experience of struggling. Second, the aesthetic account shows how striving play might be accorded a significant place in a meaningful human life, through its capacity to sculpt a unique kind of aesthetic experience. Finally, I think it is simply the correct account of a significant part of human activity.

The analysis of the make-believe, fictional side of game aesthetics is already well underway (Tavinor 2009, 2017; Robson and Meskin 2016). What we lack is an aesthetics of Suitsian play. But how could such an aesthetics even be possible? How could there be aesthetic experiences when one is just interested in winning? For one, we commonly attribute some paradigmatically aesthetic properties to particular performances in strictly Suitsian games. Chess moves are often described as elegant or lovely. On the other hand, some players are disparaged for playing ugly, albeit effective, games (Osborne 1964). Sports spectatorship is similarly full of aesthetic attributions of athletic beauty and grace (Best 1974; Cordner 1984).

What's more, there are distinctive experiences only available to the causally active game player. These are the experiences of acting, deciding, solving, and doing—not only of appreciating the movement or solution, but of originating it. And these experiences can be aesthetic. Take another paradigmatically aesthetic property: harmony. When a chess player discovers an elegant move that lets them escape a trap while simultaneously adding pressure to their opponent, the harmony of the move—the elegant fit between the challenge and the solution—is available both to the player themselves and to outsiders. But there is something more that is available only to the player: a special experience of harmony, of a fit between one's awareness, one's problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and the elegance of the output. It's not just that the solution fit the situation; it's that one's abilities fit the demands of the situation. When one's abilities precisely match the challenges, when one's mind or body is just barely able to do what's required, when one's abilities are just right to cope with the situation at hand—that is an

experience of harmony that is only available to the players themselves, a harmony between self and challenge.

Consider the difference between two superficially similar activities—dancing freely and rock climbing. Dancing freely—as I do by myself with headphones on—can be an aesthetic proprioceptive experience (Montero 2006). My movements can feel to me expressive, dramatic, and, when I am lucky enough, graceful. I also rock climb, and rock climbing is full of aesthetic proprioceptive experiences. The climbing experiences that linger most potently in my mind are experiences of movement—of an inner sense of deliberateness and gracefulness, of a moment of precision and elegant economy. Climber's talk is full of aesthetic lingo—appreciation for climbs as having interesting movement, or beautiful flow (Nguyen 2017b). But, unlike most traditional forms of dance, climbing aims at overcoming an obstacle.[4] The economy and precision of a climb is required by the rock; without it, climbers would exhaust themselves and fall. Dancing may occasionally be a game, but climbing is essentially a game—it is unnecessary obstacles taken on for the activity of trying to overcome them. The aesthetics of climbing is not only an aesthetics of the climber's own motion, but an aesthetics of how that motion relates to the rock. It is not only that my movement is elegant, it is that my movement is elegant as a solution to a particular puzzle.

This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatic form of the aesthetic experience of one's own activity. Once we've seen it in games, we can find aesthetic experiences with this character in all sorts of practical tasks. I partially value philosophy because I value truth, but I also savor the feel of the moment when all the pieces fall into place—that wonderful moment of epiphany. Games can provide artfully sculpted versions of those natural experiences. There is a natural aesthetic pleasure to careful calculation. Chess seems designed, at least in part, to concentrate and refine that pleasure for its own sake. In ordinary, non-game life, we might catch glimpses of this kind of aesthetic experience—brief moments when our abilities and our tasks harmonize. But often they do not: our abilities fall far short of the tasks, or the tasks are horribly dull but we must put nose to grindstone and grade those papers anyway. However, we can design games for the sake of this harmony of practical fit. In games, the obstacles are designed to be solved by the human mind—unlike, say, the

4. I have been informed by philosophers of dance Renee Conroy and Aili Bresnahan that there are many dance-game practices, in which dancers are presented with puzzles and obstacles to prompt their dance. But that is why we call them dance-games.

tasks of curing cancer or predicting elections or grading. John Dewey ([1934] 2005) suggests that art-world practices arise from everyday practices. They are crystallizations of experiential qualities of everyday experiences. Painting is the crystallization of everyday practices of looking around, and so forth. If you believe anything of this sort, then you might think that games are the artistic crystallizations of everyday practical reasoning and practical action—of the experience of choosing, deciding, and strategizing.[5]

I propose the following category: "aesthetic striving games," which are those games designed for the purpose of providing aesthetic experiences of striving to their players. The very existence of this category, incidentally, gives us a response to certain narrower conceptions of the value of games. For example, Tom Hurka (2006: 221–24) argues that game playing can be intrinsically valuable and good, and that the intrinsic value of game playing emerges from difficult achievements. Difficulty is the internal goal of games, which we can read off of their design. "If the constitutive rules of a game make achieving its prelusory goal more difficult than it might be, this is surely because they aim at making it simply difficult" (221).

Similar views abound in the philosophy of sport, where the value of sport is often hashed out in terms of the development and exercise of skills and human excellences, where the value of that development and exercise depends on the difficulty of the sport (d'Agostino 1981; Simon 2000; Loland 2004; Kretchmar 2005; Nguyen 2017a).

But note the key step in Hurka's argument. Says Hurka, the best explanation of the fact that constitutive rules introduce difficulty is that difficulty is the point.[6] The aesthetic account of striving offers an equally plausible alternative explanation: that the rules introduce difficulty for the sake of the aesthetic qualities that will arise from engagement with

5. The aesthetics of striving is surely available as part of one's everyday experience of the world, and a natural fit with the approach of everyday aesthetics. However, I differ from Yuriko Saito's (2010: 18–23) discussion of everyday aesthetics over where games fit. In Saito's view, games are not works, since there is no prescribed way to approach them. I think games are very much works, since there are prescriptions for proper attention. It would, for example, be wrong of me to review a game based on licking the game box (Nguyen 2019).

6. Note that, though Gwen Bradford (2015: 182–25) does posit an intrinsic connection between achievement and difficulty, she does not commit herself to the view that the purpose of games is difficulty and achievement. The criticism of Hurka I give here does not apply to Bradford's view.

that difficulty. This may sound like a trivial distinction, but it is not. In Hurka's view, the more difficult the game, the better it is, so long as it is within the scope of possible human achievement. But under the aesthetic account, there are many reasons that less difficult games might also be worthwhile. For one, they might provide their own distinctive aesthetic qualities, such as those associated with power and ease.

The Artistic Medium of Games

In aesthetic striving games, there is an unusual degree of distance between the artifact itself and the primary object of aesthetic attention. In most traditional artworks, the artist creates an object which is to be the direct object of the audience's attention. In a painting, we appreciate the aesthetic properties of the painting itself—its elegance, its drama, its expressiveness. But in aesthetic striving games, the game directs us to perform an activity and then prescribes that we appreciate the aesthetic qualities of our own activity—of our own motion, our analytical abilities, and our capacities for assessment and choice. The designer aims to create an environment that triggers aesthetically appreciable player activity, and to constrain and sculpt that practical activity.[7]

So how do game designers do this? It will be useful here to think in terms of the *artistic medium* of games. Let's follow Dominic Lopes's (2014: 133–39) suggestion and allow that a medium is not merely a certain set of materials, but a set of "technical resources" for the artist. For example, the medium of oil painting is not simply paint and canvas—it also includes the techniques of painting, such as brushwork and perspective.[8] So: Is there some sort of artistic medium common to all aesthetic striving games? First, such a medium would be quite abstract—it couldn't be something as materially specific as software, video, or boards and pieces.[9]

On a first pass, we might be tempted to say that the medium of games is constraints and obstacles. Certainly, that's part of the story. But

7. I will offer a fuller analysis of the prescriptive and appreciative structure of aesthetic striving games in future work.

8. Lopes's treatment is merely the latest iteration of a useful literature on the distinction between an artistic medium and a mere physical medium. See Davies 2003 for a useful survey and general case for the distinction.

9. If the reader has a particular theory of medium here that forbids such abstraction, please substitute the term 'artistic resource', as borrowed from Riggle 2010. For a useful discussion of how abstract a medium might be, see Elisabeth Schellekens's (2007) discussion of ideas as the medium of conceptual art.

this isn't, by itself, sufficient. That view might be tempting if we focused solely on sports, which usually work by restricting the use of our natural human abilities—by disallowing the use of hands in soccer, for example. But game designers also create new sorts of actions and possibilities.[10] This is clearest in video games such as *Portal*, where I am given a gun that can shoot the ends of a wormhole into the world. But all sorts of games can create new sorts of actions through their rules. Taking a piece in chess and stealing a base in baseball are new sorts of actions that arise only within the context of particular rule sets.

One might be tempted to say, at this point, that the artistic medium of games is rules. And perhaps this is right—or it might be, if we had a sufficiently loose notion of 'rule'. But in any conventional use of 'rule', it won't suffice. Consider physical games, like artificial gym rock climbs and obstacle courses. What fills out the experience is selected physical objects, with their physical particularity and their arrangement in relation to a particular goal. A rule can tell you to use a particular game console controller, but the physicality of the controller itself also conditions the gaming experience. There is a video game, called *PewPewPewPewPewPewPewPewPew*, which illustrates this quite nicely. Two people must control a single gaming avatar, who has a jetpack and a ray gun. Both players have microphones. One player controls the jetpack by shouting "SHHHH" into their microphone, the other player controls the gun by shouting "Pew! Pew! Pew!" into their microphone. Imagine the different texture of practical experience if the game were played with buttons instead. These factors aren't just part of the rules—these are environmental features. What unites software environments and physical environments here is their relationship to challenge. We might say, then, that part of the medium is the "practical environment"—the environment conceived of in its oppositionality to the abilities we are permitted in a game and the specified goal.

But this is still not enough, for we haven't discussed a key element of game design—the goal. Reiner Knizia, elder statesman of German board game design, has said that the most important resource he has for designing games is the scoring system. The scoring system, says Knizia, creates the players' motivations (Chalkey 2008). It tells a player whether they ought to race the other players to dominate a useful resource, or

10. There is a very useful literature in computer game scholarship outside of philosophy on this, usually under the notion of game *affordances*. Cardona-Rivera and Young 2013 offers a useful recent survey of the literature.

collaborate with them, or attack and vanquish them. Without those goals, we wouldn't have obstacles at all—we wouldn't have a *practical* environment. This suggests something larger: that the game designer not only sets the world of the game, but designs the skeleton of who we will be in that world.

Here I think Suits's ([1978] 2014: 24–43) account will be of great use. Let's upload the full, technical version of Suits's analysis. When we are playing games, we are pursuing *pre-lusory goals*. These are the states of affairs we are trying to bring about during game play, described without reference to the means of achieving them. For example, the pre-lusory goal of basketball is getting the ball through the hoop. Then there are the *constitutive rules* of a game, which prohibit more efficient means in favor of less efficient means. In basketball, for example, these include various rules constraining how the ball may be moved, along with rules that create opposition. To achieve the pre-lusory goal within the means permitted by the game is to achieve the *lusory goal*.

For Suits, the truly distinctive feature of game playing is a particular motivational state in the player. In games, says Suits, we do not pursue the pre-lusory goal for its independent value. Otherwise, we would simply show up after hours with a ladder and pass the ball through the basket to our heart's content. Nor do we accept the constitutive rules because they are the most efficient way to achieve the pre-lusory goal. These rules are, by definition, imposed inefficiencies. Rather, we take them on with the *lusory attitude*: we adopt the pre-lusory goal and the constitutive rules for the sake of the activity they make possible. We adopt unnecessary obstacles to make possible the activity of overcoming them.

What it is to play a Suitsian game, then, is to accept an activity of taking specified means to a pre-lusory goal. Suitsian play involves both taking on artificial constraints and an artificial goal. The pre-lusory goal isn't by itself independently valuable—at least, not very much. We are taking on the pre-lusory goal to make a certain kind of activity possible. Outside of the context of the game, we have no, or comparatively little, interest in the pre-lusory goal. Pre-lusory goals are, then, something rather unique, from the perspective of practical reasoning and value. They are what we might call *disposable ends*. They are ends, partially detached from our normal ends, which we take up temporarily.

Before we move on to the next step of the argument, let me pause to note how utterly plausible the Suitsian story, and the notion of disposable ends, is for the experience of game playing. Think about a board game night between friends. We sit down to the game table and pull out a

new board game. We pop out the cardboard tokens onto a great heap on the table, and the players begin to sort them into neat piles of green tokens, blue tokens, and gold tokens. We don't know what these tokens are supposed to be, at first. In fact, the physical tokens themselves have no essential importance. If, for instance, a dog eats all our blue tokens, we could replace them with pennies. We open the rule-book and we are told by the game rules that the gold tokens are money, which is useful to buy various resources during the game but doesn't count toward victory at the end; the winner is simply the person who has collected the most green tokens. Before the game starts, we have no interest in collecting green tokens. During the game, if we have any competitive spirit at all, we acquire a hearty interest in the green tokens, to the point where a differential in collected tokens may inspire armpit sweats, jitters, and a surge of adrenaline at the prospect of a last-ditch plan to steal away another person's pile in a dramatic in-game maneuver. And once the game is finished, we lose our interest in the green tokens entirely, shove all of them into a messy pile and scoop them into a plastic baggie. On the face of it, the Suitsian picture, and the picture of disposable ends, fits the phenomena of play precisely.

Note that all Suitsian players have a disposable interest in the prelusory goals—acquiring green tokens—but striving players are doing something significantly odder. The disposability of an achievement player's ends is quite a shallow and easily explained phenomenon. The achievement player is enduringly interested in winning games, and that interest takes on different forms in different contexts. But the disposability of ends is, for striving players, quite a deeper and stranger affair. Striving players are taking up an interest in the winning itself as a disposable end. Striving players have the psychological capacity to both take on and put away an interest in winning. Gaming relationships such as the one in the racquetball case, above, show that psychological capacity is, at the very least, a real possibility.

Note that the relationship between struggling and winning, for the striving player, cannot be explained with a straightforward means-end story. The striving player takes on an interest in winning in order to have the struggle. But in order to have the right kind of struggle, they must put that larger purpose temporarily out of mind. Outside of the game, I can take a straightforwardly instrumental attitude toward my interest in winning. I can explain it simply: "I play chess because chess calculations are interesting." But to be in the right attitude during the game itself, I need

to adopt the mental posture where winning is something very much like a final end.

Why? Imagine what it would be like if striving players pursued winning in a normal, transparently instrumental manner. That is, suppose that striving players kept in mind the fact that they had taken up an interest in winning for the purpose of generating the activity of struggling. In that case, a striving player couldn't ever really pursue the game goals wholeheartedly. If the complete justificatory structure for our striving were constantly an active part of our practical reasoning, then we would behave very oddly in games. In any game without a time limit, if victory were in our grasp, it would be reasonable to delay the victory in order to experience more of the activity of striving.[11] But this seems like very odd behavior.

A friend of mine relates the following story: his ten-year-old son was beating him badly at *Monopoly*, and enjoying the experience so much that, every time the father was on the verge of losing, the son would offer him some free cash to keep the game going, just so the son could drive his father back into bankruptcy again.[12] The story is funny precisely because the child is failing to grasp something essential about the motivational structure of game playing. And this kind of reasoning, if pursued by mature game players, would rob game playing of a crucial element of integrity and completeness. We would not be able to enter into a fully absorbed state of play, nor could we fully experience the committed, single-minded pursuit of a goal. Maintaining this sort of fluid relationship to winning within the game itself would rob games of much of their pleasurable intensity. In order to become absorbed in the game, we must put out of mind the fact that we are only taking on the game's goals instrumentally, in order to have that desirable struggle. Winning must temporarily occupy our mind as if it were a final end. The player must submerge themselves in an alternate agency.

This helps us see what remarkable control a game designer has over the practical activity they're bringing into being. Some have said that game designers create worlds. This, I think, is selling them short. Game designers create worlds, but they also create the agencies that players will inhabit in those worlds. Game designers create spaces in which to move, obstacles in those spaces, the abilities of the in-game agents, and

11. This excellent point was originally raised to me by Christopher Yorke.

12. As a historical sidenote, it turns out that *Monopoly* was originally created by Elizabeth Maguire, a leftist activist, to illustrate the misery of capitalism (Pilon 2015).

their very motivations. Games are structures of practical reason, practical action, and practical possibility conjoined with a particular world in which that practicality will operate. A game designer designates *this* as the goal of the game player, *these* as the permitted abilities, and *those* as the landscape of obstacles in which that game player will operate. The designer creates not only the practical world in which the player will act, but also constitutes the practical agency of the actor within that world—their abilities, and their goals and values. This is why a well-designed game has the potential to more finely manipulate the sorts of practical harmonies and disharmonies we experience in our actions. Game designers can engineer agency and world to fit.

What, then, is the artistic medium of aesthetic striving games? The artistic resources with which the game designer sculpts practical experience are: the goals, the rules, and the practical environment. The game designer designs a temporary practical agency to inhabit—with its own goals and abilities—and the practical environment that agent will come into contact with. The medium of games is agency itself. If you want a slogan here, let me suggest: games are the art of agency.

The claim is not, however, that the point of games is necessarily to experience that agency, or to experience freedom. Sometimes that may be the case. However, aesthetic striving games can provide all sorts of other aesthetic experiences through the manipulation of agency—including senses of constriction, of drama, of tragedy, and, in the cases of some addictive games, an experience of the dissolution of the self (Schüll 2012: 189–209). My claim is that agency is the *medium*, and not necessarily the experiential *purpose*, of aesthetic striving games.[13] The in-game goals, the in-game abilities, and the obstacles they face are the technical resources by which the game artist sculpts various experiences of practicality for the player.[14]

13. I am not here meaning to take on the stronger view that the goal of the game designer is primarily to explore the possibilities of the medium.

14. Note that I haven't offered anything like a definition of agency. This is intentional. I do not take there to be a settled account of agency in general, and that literature is currently undergoing a number of upheavals from challenges, especially regarding the possible existence of group agents and collective agents, like companies and corporations, and attempts to think about other edge cases, including animal agency, robot agency, and the agency of algorithms (like, say, that of Google Search) (Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde 2009; List and Pettit 2011; Gilbert 2013). I am largely going to think in terms of a fairly traditional conception of agency—where agency is intentional action, or action for a reason. I am in no way presuming that this is a complete account of agency,

Disinterested Interestedness

Let's turn to some objections, which will help us to explore some of the more striking implications for our conception of agency and its potential flexibility. First, one might worry that aesthetic striving play is a conceptual impossibility. Suppose, for the moment, that one held a view like aesthetic empiricism—that, aesthetic experience must be pursued for its intrinsic value (Goldman 2006; Stang 2012; Lopes 2018: 53–87). One might then worry that Suitsian game playing is, as an activity, motivationally incompatible with aesthetic experience. After all, Suitsian game playing is essentially goal oriented, and the experiences of game playing seem like either mere side effects or mere instruments to achieving those goals. How could those experiences be intrinsically valuable?

A similar worry has haunted the philosophy of sport. There, philosophers have couched their worries in the Kantian language of disinterestedness. Suppose that a necessary property of aesthetic judgment is that it be disinterested—that is, that the aesthetic judgment is pursued not for any practical purpose but for its own sake. But the activity of playing a Suitsian game is essentially interested—it is the pursuit of an end, while absorbed in instrumental reasoning. This worry, for example, has led Stephen Mumford (2012, 2013: 1–18) to argue that aesthetic experiences are not available to the player themselves nor to the partisan spectator. Aesthetic experiences are only available to the spectating purist who cares not which team wins, but only cares disinterestedly for physical gracefulness from either side.[15]

The analysis of the disposability of ends and of the player's temporary submersion into in-game agencies gives us a less confining solution. There is no incompatibility; aesthetic striving play is compatible with either theoretical commitment. Let's start with the worry from disinterestedness. Certainly, if we zoom in, the moment-to-moment engagement with aesthetic striving play is clearly interested: I am taking certain actions

and am happy to think that I am addressing only a subcategory—say, of particularly human agency. Furthermore, I have attempted to make my claims about the nature of games independent of controversial commitments from any particular theory of human agency. I don't think we need a full definition or metaphysical account of 'paper' to usefully say that origami uses the medium of folding paper, and I don't think we need to settle on a particular philosophical account of 'agency' to usefully say that games use the medium of agency.

15. Mumford has since modified the view to include the possibility that partisan spectators may have a greater experience of drama.

for the sake of winning the game. But the aesthetic striving player is only temporarily adopting disposable ends for the sake of the experience of struggling to achieve them. Aesthetic striving play is, then, curiously both interested and disinterested. In-game, a player is interested in achieving the lusory goal. But when we step back and consider their purpose for taking on the activity of pursuing the lusory goal, we see that striving play is disinterested. I care not if my striving succeeds, but am only in it for the aesthetic qualities of the experience of striving itself. The interestedness of striving play is crucially bracketed. Aesthetic striving play is *disinterested interestedness*. Or, to put it another way, it is *impractical practicality*—practical reasoning and practical action engaged in, not for the sake of that activity's outcome, but for the sake of involvement in the activities of practical reasoning and practical action themselves. A similar argument can address the worries of incompatibility with aesthetic empiricism. Experiential striving play opens up the possibility that one can submerge oneself in a temporary practical agency for the sake of the intrinsic value of the experience of practicality.[16]

Notice, in both cases, that the solution requires a notably complex motivational structure on the part of the player. My full agential self might intrinsically value the experiences of struggling. But to have those experiences, and to have them in the particularly absorbed way that so many game players value, I must temporarily submerge myself in an alternate agency that values winning. My temporary in-game agency may not value the experiences—it may be single-minded in its pursuit of the pre-lusory goals. But my full agential self can temporarily enter into a single-minded pursuit of winning for the sake of the experiences that arise from single-mindedness.

The structure I'm describing may seem bizarre. It is something of a motivational two-step. But the more one reflects on the nature and motives of game playing, the more it seems that such a motivational two-step must be possible. If what one values is the experience of single-minded absorption in a practical task, then one cannot pursue that experience directly. Rather, one must submerge oneself in the pursuit of some other end. This is a relative of what Henry Sidgwick (1962 [1907]: 48) called the "paradox of hedonism"—that one could not achieve pleasure by pursuing it directly, but only by devoting oneself to some other end. Moral theories with this quality have been called "self-effacing" (Pettigrove 2011:

16. Daniel Vella (2016: 80–81) offers a similar account, using resources in continental aesthetics and literary theory.

192–3).[17] As Sidgwick says, the rational method of attaining such an end requires that "we should to some extent put it out of sight and not directly aim at it" (136). Perhaps the technique of adopting temporary agencies will turn out to let us intentionally pursue certain kinds of self-effacing ends. To explore that possibility, we'll need to look more deeply into the rational structure of those temporary agencies.

Layered Agencies

Striving play requires that we have a capacity to temporarily restructure our agency in certain ways. Let's consider some ways one might resist the picture I'm building; it will, among other things, help to develop the details of the picture, and help us to see how all the pieces fit together.

First, one might resist this picture by insisting that nothing of substance changes in the structure of our ends between ordinary life and game life. Rather, games are simply contexts in which we temporarily highlight certain goals, making them the momentary focuses of our attention. But this deflationary suggestion won't capture the way in which we must aggressively seal ourselves off from the vast majority of our usual ends and considerations during game play. Let's return to our money-lending *Monopoly*-playing child. Imagine that they grow up to be a striving player who still pursues all game ends in a transparently instrumental way. They pursue winning for the sake of having the struggle, and this justification is always part of any practical reasoning they do in playing games. What would count as a rational move for the player would then be quite odd. If they were playing a game of untimed chess, winning would terminate the struggle. In that case, it would be reasonable for them to avoid game-winning moves in order to prolong the struggle. Or, in the middle of a competitive game, suppose our player saw a particularly devastating move that would radically tilt the balance of power, and which would make the rest of the game quite easy for them. It would be reasonable for them to avoid that devastating move, in order to maintain the experience of a desperate struggle. But having to take these sorts of reasons into account would crucially undermine the experience of the game. So long as this player was still in touch with their larger reasons for playing the game, then game playing would create for them a perpetually anxious second-

17. The language of "self-effacement" was introduced by Derek Parfit (1984: 23–24). Recent discussion has also included Keller 2007, Annas 2008, and Hurka 2000. I draw the formulation I use most directly from Pettigrove's (2011) discussion.

ary consciousness. They would need to worry not only about losing but also about winning too quickly. It seems unlikely, then, that they could ever truly feel the grip of a desperate struggle in a game. Transparency to their larger purpose during the process of play itself has undermined their ability to achieve that larger purpose. In order to support the experience of wholehearted absorption in striving, a player must be able to put out of mind their larger purpose. For the duration of the game, the game's ends must occupy the dominant position in setting the agent's motivation and attention.

A skeptic could try to answer this need with a second, slightly less deflationary suggestion. Perhaps we can seal ourselves off from ends that we already have, but we simply cannot acquire any new ends. Agential fluidity, according to this second suggestion, is simply our capacity to momentarily blot out most of our ends, so that we can achieve total absorption in the ends that remain. This suggestion could explain how game players can avoid that anxious secondary consciousness, while avoiding the stronger claim that players can actually acquire new ends temporarily. But this second deflationary suggestion, too, seems to ignore a wide variety of phenomena. The fact that we play stupid games is evidence that we can take on temporary ends that have nothing to do with our enduring ends. The ends we take on in a stupid game are, in fact, incompatible with our enduring ends. During a stupid game, we take on the end of succeeding, but our larger purpose is enjoying our failure. Furthermore, think about how fluidly we can take up and abandon our interests in winning. Suppose I have a party full of socially awkward people, who are utterly failing to mingle. I propose a game as a pleasant icebreaker. Perhaps it is charades. We break up into teams, and we each acquire a particular interest in winning. We acquire, in fact, an interest in cooperating with one arbitrarily assigned set of people in order to beat another arbitrarily assigned set of people. We play the game for a while; we invest ourselves in it. But if the game is failing to serve its purpose—if, for example, it is making people anxious and causing them to bicker miserably, we can easily pivot. We can decide the game isn't fun and abandon it—and then our interest in winning simply fades. If I set up the game of charades for the sake of social ease and fun but it isn't fulfilling that purpose, I don't grudgingly give in as the genuine value of winning is outweighed by other considerations. Instead, winning just comes to seem pointless. The phenomenal experience of exiting such a game is not one where the game's ends rejoin the constellation of our other ends,

as if we were unsealing ourselves from a temporary box. It is one where the game's ends fade entirely out of sight. It can't be, then, that I had those ends all along. The interest in winning at charades is a new end, created temporarily, and disposed of when we are through with the game.

If we accept that genuine but disposable ends are a real possibility, then we must take ourselves to have a very odd capacity. In order to be immersed in the activity of striving, we have to take on temporarily an interest in winning as something like a final end. This is not, however, best described as a change in our agency, or even the temporary wholesale adoption of a new agency. Rather, it is best described as a *layered agency*—as the creation of a temporary agency nested within our overall agency. This is because the ends of our primary agency continue to regulate the maintenance of the temporary gaming agency, though in an interestingly distanced way. When I play a game of *Super Mario Kart*, I adopt a temporary agency that wishes to win the race. I make that temporary agency dominant. I immerse myself within it, but within certain limitations. My actions inside that game are regulated by the temporary agency's ends, but my immersion within that temporary agency is still regulated by the interests of my overall agency. I intermittently step back from the temporary agency and ask myself: is this fun? Are we having a good time, or is this game so terrible that we should just give it up and play something else? Furthermore, we retain the capacity to cancel our psychological immersion in the gaming agency if the right reasons break through. A fire alarm or a text from a friend in distress will give a player a reason to cancel the game and its attendant temporary agency. But so long as the background monitoring processes of our full agency haven't broken through with such a cancellation, we let the temporary agency regulate our decisions and dominate our consciousness.

But why do we take on that temporary agency? Much of the appeal of games is that we do not have to deal with the complex fluidity of the world and its welter of plural and ambiguous values. And the very fact that game playing seems to us motivationally clearer than ordinary life shows that, in the transition into game playing, we have changed a part of our agential structure. If we didn't accept the possibility of agential layering and immersion in alternative agencies, we would have a hard time explaining the shift between the motivationally scattered experience of ordinary life—full of its myriad competing purposes—and the pleasing single-minded motivational clarity of game playing. That shift is well explained by ascribing to us an ability to set up an alternative agency and temporarily submerge ourselves in it. The very experience of single-

mindedness in games is itself a reason to believe in agential fluidity and agential layering.

This, incidentally, might come as something of a surprise to certain theorists of agency and practical reason. For some theorists, agency is a fairly coherent and slow-moving affair. Consider Elijah Millgram's (1997: 50–56) picture of agency. First, for Millgram, an agent's ends are subject to a "unity constraint." Consider, says, Millgram, what the unity of agency consists in. What makes a value, end, or other consideration belong to a particular agent is that it can weigh with or against other such considerations in any other chain of practical reasoning by that same agent. And that unity of agency, says Millgram, is something we should desire. To the degree that we are not unified, we are agential failures—we are absentminded, unable to bring a relevant consideration to mind, or something else along those lines. Second, for Millgram, an agent's final ends change quite slowly. We can't simply choose our ends. Our ends change only through a gradual process of intellectual phototropism. We try out new ways of life—we change jobs, we change hobbies, we change political allegiances—and slowly, as we come to find that this way of life fits or doesn't fit us, our ends change to match (1997: 11–42, 2004, 2015: 234–68). The picture that emerges is, if not of an agent set in stone, of a fairly gummy and viscous agent.

But the fact that we take up alternate agencies in striving play weighs against this picture of the viscous agent and against the ideal of the agent as entirely unified. In games, we take up new ends voluntarily and quickly; we are fluidly playing around with parts of our own agency. The capacity for moderate voluntary disunity turns out to be something of an achievement. Let's compare the game-playing agency I've described to Millgram's ideal of agential unity in a little more detail. When Millgram's ideal agent is considering a chain of practical reasoning, other relevant defeating considerations will bring themselves to mind. I wish to buy this car for the sake of access to the outdoors, but then considerations of budget pop to mind. None of us can be perfectly ideal agents, admits Millgram, but departures from this agential unity are to be mourned. Those departures are, he says, all to be identified as various diseases of the will: weakness of the will, absent-mindedness, and the like (1997: 54). But the ideal striving game player can seal themselves off from most of their normal considerations. When I play games against my spouse for mutual fun, I must be able to forget about my interest in mutual fun during the game. I need to turn off my usual interests and prevent

them from coming to mind—such as my interest in helping my spouse in all ways. The ideal agent, then, should have the power to voluntarily and temporarily give up agential unity in specific, controlled, and highly localized ways. This might seem strange—but I hope to have shown that this sort of purposeful and managed agential disunity is utterly normal. What's strange is that certain philosophical accounts of agency and rationality haven't made room for it.

The skeptic might respond here by protesting that I am, in fact, helping my spouse to have fun by playing against her. The skeptic is entirely correct here about our larger purpose. Considerations of mutual pleasure may, in fact, be exactly why my spouse and I have taken up this game together (Nguyen 2017a: 132–35). But the point is that, in order to have the kind of good time on offer, we need to submerge ourselves inside temporary agencies that are wholly competitive. Our larger purpose is mutual pleasure, but when we are playing the game, our particular actions are not guided by these considerations of mutual pleasure. Otherwise, we would be forced into that peculiar anxious double-consciousness: we would need to make, not the most competitive and strategically useful moves, but those moves that would give each other exactly the amount of challenge to have a good time. Perhaps, in a few particular gaming contexts, we do maintain that kind of double-consciousness. Chess tutors sometimes select their particular moves for the sake of student learning, or parents will select moves for the sake of their child's enjoyment. But to achieve the kind of absorbed, thrilling play that is paradigmatic of fully competitive play, we must submerge ourselves fully in our temporary agencies. To help each other have fun in the particular way that competitive chess is fun, we do not pursue each other's fun as our direct object *during the game*. And we don't want to have to keep being reminded of their welfare and keep having to dismiss it, either. We want to *turn off* our mind's tendency to remind us of particular sorts of consideration. We want to be able, for the moment, to partially disunify our agency.

I suspect, in fact, that, once games have helped us to get a good picture of how layered agencies work, we will find them elsewhere in life. At a guess, I'd hazard that many professional roles—the professor role, the lawyer role, the judge role—involve taking on a layered agency. For example, one might think that a person interested in arriving at a balanced and considered set of beliefs might best achieve their goals by temporarily submerging themselves in a role in which they advocated

wholeheartedly for one position, inside an adversarial system in which somebody else took on an opposing role.[18]

Let's return now to the question of self-effacement. Does agential layering give us a general technique for dealing with all kinds of self-effacing ends? They do not—not, at least, for every type. Agential layering can only help us with certain types of self-effacing ends. This is because layered agencies manipulate, not our actual justifications, but only our awareness of them. Think about the justifications I can offer for game playing. While absorbed in the game play, I can explain why I am making these particular moves: they are to win the game. And when asked why I'm trying to win the game, I can also provide a perfectly good response: I am playing it to have fun, or for aesthetic reasons, or for brain training. Each stage is justified by the next; when we step back, we can see that all the justifications form a coherent chain. It is simply that, when I am absorbed in game play, I must put out of mind the earlier stages of justification. In other words, layered agencies block momentary awareness of the justificatory chain, but don't disrupt the chain itself. This kind of layered agency cannot deal with certain forms of self-effacement. Consider the sorts of ends that are *justificationally* self-effacing. As Michael Stocker (1976: 459) says, the pleasures that arise from love are self-effacing, precisely because if one pursues having love for the sake of one's own pleasure, then one is not actually in love. Since the form of self-effacement here is one that forbids the motive of selfish pleasure from occurring anywhere in the justificatory stream of loving, then using a layered agency won't help. Consider, by contrast, the end of relaxing. I cannot relax by trying to relax, but this is simply a matter of psychology. I can't relax when I remember that I need to relax. Unlike with love, there is no essential contradiction between the process of submerging yourself in the pursuit of an artificial goal, and the end of relaxing. Layered agencies are perfectly capable of handling such self-effacing ends, and, in fact, we often use agential layering to pursue them.

Skepticism about Disposable Ends

Striving play shows that we are capable of submerging ourselves in a temporary agency, as specified by the game. A temporary agency has three primary features. First, it is oriented toward a disposable end. Second, it is

18. For example, Philip Kitcher's (1990) views about the ideal cognitive division of labor on the sciences might be taken to show the usefulness of such role-switching.

focused on using certain abilities to attain that end. And third, to the degree that the enduring agent has submerged themselves in such a temporary agency, they are out of contact with their usual ends.

But one might still be skeptical of this picture. In particular, one might wish to deny that the disposable in-game ends were really genuine ends. Rather, the skeptic would want to claim, disposable ends are some sort of pseudo-end. Let me take up several forms of such skepticism. Dealing with them will help to show how games and striving play can shed light on fundamental features of our agency and practical rationality. What we mean here by a "genuine end" is, however, something of a delicate matter. Obviously, the in-game ends of striving play are not exactly like our enduring ends, since they are temporary and disposable. But I think that game ends are, in most other respects, much more like our enduring ends than they are like certain familiar sorts of pseudo-ends. Whether game ends are "genuine ends," then, can be made clearer by thinking about the contrast classes. So, in what senses might disposable ends fail to be genuine?[19]

Perhaps, in a game, I am merely pretending that something is my end, rather than taking it on as an actual, albeit disposable, end. Perhaps a player is merely *acting as if* the game's goals were their end. Let's call this the objection from *pretense*. Suppose that I am a con man, trying to get a Silicon Valley millionaire to marry me so that I can I make away with half their money in the divorce. I pretend to fall in love with them. I pretend to take their well-being on as one of my final ends. But what guides my actions are not the pretend ends of love, but my genuine ends of getting money. My decisions will be guided, not by the aim of maximizing their well-being, but by the aim of convincing them that I am in love with them, so that I can get their money. And these can come apart. For example, the best way for me to convince them that I am in love with them might be to subtly shatter their confidence and drive them slightly insane, so that I can magnify their dependence on me and more easily manipulate their beliefs.[20]

But in games, a striving player does not merely pretend to take on the game's goal as an end. They actually take on that end. It is a genuine end, and not a pseudo-end, in the following senses: the disposable end

19. I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing the objections considered in this section.

20. This horrible example is adapted from the film *Gaslight*, which is the origin of the term 'gaslighting'.

plays the central role and immediate role in regulating the player's choices and actions, for as long as they have adopted that end. It plays an experiential role, creating a gripping experience of success and failure. And it plays a normative role, setting what the player should have done, even if they failed to do so.

The skeptic can now fall back on a second objection. The skeptic could claim that what we've adopted isn't a genuine end or a pretend end, but rather a *make-believe* end. When I watch a horror movie, I take on a make-believe interest in the protagonist's survival. I am terrified by threats to the protagonist; I am elated when the protagonist finally vanquishes the monster. In make-believing that I have an end, I am not just pretending. I'm not simply going through the motions. I imagine myself as having that end, and that imagination is often enough to arouse powerful emotional responses. Perhaps, then, we can explain the way that a game grips us and evokes emotional responses, by supposing that we have acquired only a make-believe end.

Importantly, for the skeptic's point, these make-believe ends aren't genuine ends. To see why, let's turn to Kendall Walton's (1978) discussion of make-believe fears. Consider Charles, who is sitting in a movie theater, watching a horror movie. The movie shows a monstrous green slime looking around, until its eyes finally fix on the viewer; then it charges straight at the viewer. Charles cringes and shrieks; afterward, he says he was "terrified" of the slime. But this isn't real fear, says Walton; it is only make-believe fear. Genuine fear brings us to act in appropriate ways toward the object and Charles doesn't so act. He doesn't leap out of the movie theater and run for his life, nor does he call the police for help. What Charles does have is a set of fear-like physiological responses, which Walton calls "quasi-fear." Charles, says Walton, is using his quasi-fear as a prop, which helps Charles to make-believe that he is afraid. Charles is imagining a fictional world in which there really is a slime, and imagining a fictional version of himself who is threatened by, and afraid of, that slime.

One's make-believe ends, then, aren't ends one actually has. They are ends that one imagines one's fictional self as holding. This is why one's make-believe ends don't guide one's actions directly, though one's genuine ends can take make-believe ends into account. What determines the direction of our action is our genuine ends, and especially whether those ends directs us toward supporting or frustrating our make-believe

ends.[21] To borrow an example from Walton (1990: 21–24), imagine that some children are playing a game of make-believe in which they pretend that tree stumps are bears. Their real motivation is to experience a fiction about running in fear from bears. In their imagined fiction, their fictional selves have the ends of surviving and getting away from the bears. But the children's real actions and choices in their game aren't directly guided by these make-believe ends. They don't, for example, leave the forest, which would let them avoid any and all stumps, thus saving their fictional selves from the fictional bears.[22] The children make-believe that they are running away from stump-bears, but they do so by actually and knowingly running toward more stumps. Their choices and actions are regulated by their genuine end of experiencing a fiction of terror, and not their make-believe end of getting away from the bears. In fact, their genuine ends bring them to act in ways that will help them to imagine that their make-believe ends are being frustrated.

We can now put the skeptic's second objection more clearly. Make-believe ends are not our real ends; they are merely the ends we imagine our fictional selves as having. They don't play an immediate role in regulating action. The skeptic's objection, then, is that game ends are make-believe ends rather than genuine ends, because we only imagine our fictional selves as holding them. For example: when I play *Super Mario Brothers*, I imagine that my fictional avatar wants to rescue the princess. That is my end in the game. But that is only a make-believe end, held by my imaginary Mario-self. I, the player, do not actually want to rescue the princess, because the princess doesn't actually exist.

I do not think that the skeptic's second objection is right. Certainly, some games build fictional worlds, and I can imagine my fictional self as having a make-believe end in those fictions. But I can also acquire, in striving play, real ends of my own, which are distinct from my fictional self's make-believe ends. Jesper Juul's analysis of video games is quite useful here. Most video games, says Juul, are hybrids; they are half fictional and half real. Imagine that we are playing a multiplayer online shooter, and my avatar shoots yours with a bazooka. Fictionally, I have shot you,

21. I owe this point to Anthony Cross.

22. Recall that in Walton's account of make-believe, props generate fictional truths by rules of generation. The rule that "stumps are bears" is a rule of generation that uses features in the real world to generate fictional truths. In such a way, a fictional world can run outside of the immediate voluntary control of the make-believer.

and fictionally, I have killed you. But it is nonfictional that I have scored points on you, that I have won an advantage, that I have beaten you, and that I have demonstrated my greater skill over you (Juul 2004: 163–96). Importantly, winning is a fact about the real world, requiring actual skills. The end of winning can guide not only actual in-game actions, but also actual out-of-game training and practice.[23] There are, then, two ends involved with playing *Super Mario Brothers*: my make-believe end of rescuing the princess and my real end of winning the game. Certainly, in many games, these two sorts of ends are bound together, so that the actions that support my own ends also will support my make-believe ends in the fiction. But it is crucial to distinguish my make-believe ends from my own end of winning. For one thing, make-believe ends and the end of winning often come apart. First, some games simply offer win-conditions that run contrary to the make-believe ends on offer. For example, the tabletop role-playing game *Fiasco* simulates a hysterical story of con jobs gone wrong. The rules incentivize the players to act against their character's make-believe interests in order to generate a comic narrative of disaster. Second, some games don't involve any apparent fictional world at all, but still involve an interest in winning. Imagine, for example, a game where I have myself air-dropped into the Alaskan backcountry in order to have the struggle of getting out alive on my own resources. I have acquired a disposable end of survival without help, but this end, and the activity it inspires, are entirely nonfictional.[24] Third, even for games where an imaginary fictional world is possible, many players don't imagine that fictional world or any fictional counterpart. Consider the difference between a novice chess player, playing a *Lord of the Rings* themed chess set and imagining themselves as a fantasy general, and a professional chess player, focused entirely on potential moves and counter-moves.[25] To return to

23. Note that striving players can sometimes have good reason to train for and increase their skill, insofar as that skill increase might lead to a more valuable struggle. Many rich strategy games, such as chess and go, become more interesting for the skilled players. It is not only achievement players that train.

24. The Alaskan backcountry example is drawn from Nguyen forthcoming, where I offer an argument that Suitsian game play and Waltonian make-believe are distinct concepts, neither reducible to the other. A note of caution: Walton's use of the term 'game' is different from Suits's; Walton's notion of a game involves adherence to certain rules for generating the make-believe world, but doesn't involve voluntary obstacles or lusory goals.

25. For a further discussion of this point, as well as empirical evidence about how involvement in imaginative exercises tends to decline as players become more serious about competition, see Dor 2014. I am suppressing some complexity in the main text. The literature on Waltonian fictions and videogames is already extensive, and space does not

the *Super Mario* case, what we find is a variety of possible motives for playing. Some players may want to win in order to experience the fiction of their avatar successfully rescuing the princess. Some players may want to lose, in order to experience the fiction of their avatar failing.[26] But many other players simply want to win, and don't care about the fiction at all. They just want to get a new high score. The player's genuine ends, then, are what actually guides their action. Striving players can acquire the end of winning and make it the central source of action-guidance during play. And their interest in winning can be entirely unrelated to their make-believe ends. The end of winning, then, can be acquired as a genuine end.[27]

The skeptic can now try a third approach. They can claim that game ends are acquired for the wrong kinds of reasons and so cannot function as real ends. Why might this be? Consider Millgram's (1997:

permit a complete discussion. Let me offer some additional details about how Walton's account might work out for interactive fictions. In traditional adult fictions like novels and movies, the audience members cannot make decisions that will alter basic facts of the fiction. In interactive fictions—which include video games, but also branching hypertexts—the audience does make such decisions. This makes interactive fictions more like children's games of make-believe, as Walton describes them, than traditional works of "adult" fiction. In interactive fictions, the audience's *genuine* ends, actions, and attitudes can interact with their *make-believe* ends, actions, and attitudes, in a complex way. The players of video games, for instance, may use the physical difficulties of manipulating their controller, and their mild frustration in doing so, as a prop for imagining their fictional selves running and jumping, and doing so in a state of terror (Tavinor 2009: 41–59; Robson and Meskin 2016). Furthermore, the player may take real actions *in order* to influence the fiction in a certain way. For a further discussion of complex relationship between make-believe ends and the end of winning, see Van de Mosselaer 2018. For a relevant discussion of how Waltonian make-believe is not the best explanation for the interest in winning sports, including among fans, see Stear 2017. The current consensus, which I echo in the main text, is that make-believe ends may interact with genuine ends, but that we should think of game players as having one system of genuine ends and a distinct system of make-believe ends. Sometimes their genuine end is bringing about a make-believe success of make-believe ends—but this is not always the case.

26. There are many online videos of such performances, most of which are intentionally comedic.

27. Notice some subtly different motivations that are possible here. Players can be interested in winning, or they can be interested in experiencing a fiction in which their avatar fulfills a make-believe interest in winning. The former is striving play proper, the latter is an interest in experiencing a certain kind of fiction. Of course, a player can also have both interests simultaneously. The point is only that they are conceptually separable, and that the disposable interest in winning is a possible end of a player.

11–28) discussion of the right and wrong reasons to desire.[28] Millgram argues that one can never acquire a desire for instrumental reasons—that is, that the desire itself would be good to have. I can only desire something if I have reasons to want the thing itself. But if this is right, then striving play should be impossible, since striving play involves acquiring desires for instrumental reasons. In striving play, I induce myself to desire winning, not because I actually want to win, but because having that desire will get me a valuable struggle.

Does Millgram's analysis show that striving play is impossible? To answer that question, we'll need to look at his discussion in some detail. Millgram says that there are two different kinds of reasons to have a desire. First, we might desire a thing because we think the thing itself is desirable. Call that a *constitutive* reason to desire. Second, we might have reason to desire something because it would be useful to have the desire. Call this an *instrumental* reason to desire.[29] Notice that striving play involves acquiring a desire for instrumental reasons. (Let's assume that the notions of "having something as an end" and "desiring something" are close enough to treat together, for the purposes of the present discussion.)

Says Millgram: only constitutive reasons can generate genuine desires; instrumental reasons never can. Imagine, says Millgram, that I am a car salesman. To be a good car salesman, I need to have enthusiasm for a lot of the silly extra features on cars, like moonroofs. Suppose that

28. I confine my remarks here only to Millgram's discussion of desiring at will in *Practical Induction (1997)*. I've chosen this discussion, not because it is Millgram's most up-to-date discussion of the topic, but for the sake of staging an informative exchange about striving play. Millgram's discussion of instrumental desire-acquisition arises as part of a larger discussion of desiring at will. I intend my remarks here to weigh only against the discussion of instrumental desire-acquisition. Elsewhere in his discussion, Millgram discusses the problem of acquiring desires willy-nilly—that is, for any reason at all (35–36). Notice that the discussion of striving play does not bear on that latter issue, for striving desires are usually acquired for specific and narrow reasons, like they might support a particular and valuable sort of struggle. Obviously, lurking in the back wings here are larger issues about the structure of action and value. I think that striving play may have interesting repercussions for Derek Parfit's (2001) account of state-given reasons, David Velleman's (1992) account of the guise of the good, and Christine Korsgaard's (2009) account of self-constitution, and other related discussions. I plan to explore these issues in future work.

29. I have adapted the "constitutive" language from Pamela Hieronymi's (2006) discussion of an analogous distinction concerning intending at will. I use Millgram's term 'instrumental', rather than Hieronymi's term 'external', for consistency with Millgram's language.

the best way for me to have such enthusiasm is to desire those things for myself. I happen to have no such desires naturally. But suppose, says Millgram, that I could simply take a pill that would give me those desires. Call this *desiring-at-pill*. So I take a pill and acquire the purported desires for the purpose of selling more cars. Later on, I lose my job. As a parting gift, I am offered the opportunity to buy a car with a decent discount on all those extra features. Will I actually act on those desires-at-pill and buy those features? No, says Millgram, I will not. Instead, I will recall that I only acquired those desires for instrumental reasons in the first place. I will realize that I have no reason to think those features actually desirable, but that I only induced in myself some apparent desires for the sake of generating some salesmanly enthusiasm. So I have no actual reason to pay for those extra features at all.

This shows that what I acquired was never a real desire at all, because I won't actually act on it. A real desire, says Millgram, is constituted by its role in practical inferences. When I have a desire, I am committed to act to fulfill it. But desires-at-pill don't involve any such inferential commitments, so they're not real desires at all. Note that this is not just a semantic point about how we use the term 'desire'. Millgram's point is that instrumental reasons can't provide the right motivational foundation for action. We can never instrumentally reason our way to a desire and then act from it, because instrumental reasons don't go through in the right way. Real desires, says Millgram, involve two kinds of inferential commitments. First, there are *forward-directed commitments* to the inferences that I am committed to making from a desire. A desire to have a car, for example, commits me to inferring that I ought to consider good car bargains. Then there are *backward-directed commitments*, which concern "the origin and reasonableness of the psychological states from which my inferences are going to proceed" (26). In having a desire and taking on its forward-directed commitments, I also commit myself to having the right basis for those forward-directed commitments. In other words, the forward- and backward-directed commitments need to line up properly. And with constitutive reasons, the backward-directed commitments do line up correctly with the forward-directed commitments. A constitutive reason to desire speaks to the actual desirability of a thing, which justifies future inferences to pursue that thing. The problem with desiring-at-pill is that the forward- and backward-directed commitments don't line up. When I took the pill to create the desire for a moonroof, I did it because I had reasons *that having the desire for moonroofs was desirable*, and not reasons *that moonroofs themselves were desirable*. And only reasons con-

cerning the actual desirability of moonroofs could justify the forward-directed commitment to pay extra for a moonroof. The mere fact that I have an instrumental reason to desire moonroofs does not justify any practical inferences toward actually buying moonroofs. And this is why, says Millgram, instrumentally supported desires aren't real desires. A desire for something, supported wholly by instrumental reasons, gives me no reason to actually act from the desire in pursuit of the desired object—so it isn't a real desire at all.

So does Millgram's argument show that striving play is impossible? Millgram's analysis seems right of desires-at-pill, but I do not think that his analysis applies to every sort of instrumentally acquired desire. It does not apply to the desires acquired during striving play. Let's distinguish between two different kinds of instrumental reasons to desire. The car salesman only has an *occurrent* reason to desire a moonroof. Simply *having* the desire will grant them the valuable consequence. In this case, there is no reason for them to actually act from that desire; all their reasons concern only having that desire occur in them.[30] Thus, their backward-directed commitments won't match up to any forward-directed inferential commitments to act from that desire. On the other hand, the striving player has a *practical* reason to desire to win. They want to acquire a desire to win so that they can have a struggle. But they can have that struggle only if their desire is inferentially embedded and does, in fact, lead them to act. Thus, their reasons support not only their having the desire but also their acting from it in pursuit of the desired object. Striving players' backward-directed commitments do, in fact, match up with their forward-directed commitments. The problem of disconnected commitments only arises for occurrent instrumental reasons and not for practical instrumental reasons.

What striving play exposes, then, is that there are actually three sorts of reasons to have a desire for X. There are constitutive reasons having to do with the desirability of X itself. There are occurrent instrumental reasons having to do with the desirability of *having* the desire for X. And there are practical instrumental reasons having to do with the desirability of *acting* on the desire for X. In other words, the reasons could aim at the desire, the pursuit, or X itself. And notice that Millgram's argument, about the disconnectedness of the backward-directed and forward-

30. Note that Gregory S. Kavka's (1983) toxin puzzle has a similar structure: the reason to have the desire arises from a positive consequence from merely having the desire, and not from acting on the desire.

directed commitments, only applies to occurrent instrumental reasons. Only in those cases do our reasons for having a desire fail to generate reasons to act. The argument doesn't apply to those cases where the desire is justified in terms of the pursuit it inspires, because the pursuit-oriented reasons do, in fact, give us reason to act. Millgram's argument, as it stands, overgeneralizes from a problem with one type of instrumental desire-acquisition to a problem with all forms of instrumental desire-acquisition. And thinking about striving play helps to expose the existence of an overlooked second form of instrumental desire-acquisition.

Let's step back now and treat all three of the skeptic's worries together. The disposable ends acquired by the striving play are, obviously, not exactly like our enduring ends. But all the worries about their genuineness had the same sort of structure. In all cases, a genuine end (or desire) was contrasted with some other pseudo-end. Each type of pseudo-end had certain resemblances to genuine ends, but in each case, the pseudo-end didn't or couldn't play that central role in guiding actions. The various pseudo-ends could not be directly inserted into practical inferences, nor could they directly weigh in favor of and lead to an action. At best, they could enter into practical inferences when they are referred to by a genuine end—such as when my genuine end is to create a fiction in which my fictional self fails to fulfill its fictional end. Those pseudo-ends don't contain practical commitments in themselves. But, unlike pretend ends, make-believe ends, and desires-at-pill, the ends acquired by the striving player can play that central action-guiding role. When we are absorbed in a game, our disposable end is a commitment to act in pursuit of the game's goals. That disposable end can be inserted directly into practical inferences and play an immediate and dominant role in setting our decisions and actions.

On the Thinness and Precision of Game Values

Finally, one might worry that there is something existentially troubling about the artificial nature of these game ends and our single-minded pursuit of them. In our full life, we are, if we are adequate human beings, guided by a complex set of values. We must balance considerations, sound out subtle values, and try to translate them into concrete actions. We are, furthermore, constantly rubbing up against other people and their plural values. How different that is from our existence in Suitsian games, where the goals are usually clear, well defined, and measurable—and where we are usually pitted against others with identical, though opposed, goals.

Game goals are usually thin and precise; they are very different from full human values, which are often subtle, flexible, and ambiguous. One might note that the assumptions of classical economics—that we are all identically rational, identically self-interested agents engaged in pure self-interested competition—is probably false of real life, but precisely right of many Suitsian games.

This would be a problem if we were to suppose that the purpose of games was simply to model or represent parts of life. In that case, the clarity and quantifiability of game values would be something of a lie. For example, Miguel Sicart (2009) has argued that the real ethical harm of games comes, not from fictional violence, but from the quantification of good and evil acts. This, suggests Sicart, cuts off moral reflection and promotes the belief that morality is simplistic. We might expand Sicart's criticism and claim that all scoring systems promote a banality of value—that they present our interests and values as oversimplified.

But, one might think, that is precisely the point of games. One of the greatest pleasures of games is that they offer a certain existential balm, a momentary shelter from the existential complexities of ordinary life. In a game, for once in my life, I know exactly what it is that I'm supposed to be doing. This helps promote the single-mindedness so crucial to many desirable aesthetic experiences of striving. What's more, the clarity of purpose can help support the existence of certain aesthetic qualities that don't easily emerge in normal life, and help us to encounter them more unambiguously.[31]

Consider those experiences of beauty grounded in functionality. As Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson (2008: 62–110) point out, certain experiences of beauty are best explained as being grounded in an artifact's fittingness to its purpose. Their examples include elegantly designed machines, architecture, and living organisms. The primary difficulty for a theory of functional beauty, say Parsons and Carlson, is that the proper function of an artifact is often indeterminate. Parsons and Carlson offer a complex solution—one in which we turn to an organism's evo-

31. Samuel Scheffler (2016: 56–57) makes a similar point, when he says that it can be a "relief to retreat into an artificial, rule-governed world in which, on the one hand, it is very clear what matters and, on the other hand, it is also very clear that what matters in the game doesn't really matter." Note that Scheffler only discusses the relief function, and doesn't consider the aesthetic experiences enabled by value clarity. Note, also, that the form of relief I've described does not depend on our being aware of the arbitrariness of game goals; in fact, I've suggested that many of the key experiences depend on our putting that arbitrariness out of mind.

lutionary history or an artifact's market and production history to determine its proper function. But such an evaluation is extremely complicated, and, in practice, the result often may be epistemically blurry. Even if an object possesses a metaphysically singular proper function, what that function is, exactly, will often be quite difficult to determine. If I need to know the evolutionary history of human bodies to know whether a particular movement fulfills their proper function, then, lacking that knowledge, my judgments of functional beauty will be hesitant and insecure. But notice that this blurriness disappears in games. In most games, the proper function of objects and actions is entirely clear, and so the fact that the action fits its purpose is entirely clear. The point of a golf stroke is to drive the ball toward the hole. Teleologically hazy objects and actions are reconstituted within the context of the game as teleologically obvious. It is easier to judge functional beauty in games because the relevant functional purposes are extremely well defined.

Thus, we should expect that the very clarity of game goals will ground clearer and more epistemically confident perceptions of functional beauty in games than in ordinary life. And I think this is precisely what we find. It is much easier to point out a perfectly elegant chess move than an elegant act of governance. Practical harmonies between agent and world are easier to achieve when the agent is thinner, simpler, and clearer, and when the agent's motivation has been temporarily cleared of various ambiguities and complexities. Games are a teleologically crisper context, and teleologically entangled aesthetic judgments are correspondingly crisper and clearer in games.

A Library of Agencies

Let me step back and sum up. We've been edging, from different angles, up to a larger and fuzzier insight. Let me conclude by attempting a sketch of it. In game playing, we take on alternate agencies. The game designer can shape a specific form of agency and then pass it to the player. The clarity of the rules and the crispness of the goals make it easier for us to find our way to a novel form of agency. Thus, games allow for the curious possibility of *communicating* agencies. Games join, then, the various methods and technologies we have invented for recording aspects of our experience. We record sights in paintings, photographs, and movies. We record stories in novels, movies, and songs. And we record agencies in games. By letting us inscribe modes of agency in stable artifacts, games can help constitute a *library of agencies*.

Playing games can offer experiential immersion in a wide variety of different agencies. And when a person plays a varied diet of games, they will have exposed themselves to many different modes of agency. One agency might focus on speed, another on elegance, or on precise look ahead, or on giving oneself up to one's intuitive reactions. Each game also situates its proffered agency against particular practical demands, thus offering an experience of a way an agency might relate to particular situational requirements. Games can thus familiarize a player with a wide variety of alternative agencies. And, since in games we try out different styles of agency in particular practical circumstances, wide exposure helps us learn how to apply that inventory in the right circumstances.

This helps us fend off a certain naive view about the relationship between rules and freedom. It is often thought that free play, rather than structured games, is the way to encourage the freedom and autonomy of players (Sicart 2014). I've argued, instead, that structured games can help us develop precisely because of their well-defined goals and clearly stated rules. Their teleological crispness and prescriptive clarity helps players find their way into novel modes of agency. And this helps us to understand why it might be easier to acquire a mode of agency from a game than from real life. It is easier to start trying out an unfamiliar way of being when somebody tells you exactly what to do. This is true with yoga and other physical training. If there is a mode of movement or a postural stance that is unfamiliar to me, the easiest way for me to find my way there is to submit myself to very precise direction about where to stand, where to put my feet, and how to move. A new agential mode is likewise easier to find through precise directions about what goals to pursue and which means to use. In this way, we can find our way to a greater flexibility with our agency, by temporarily submitting ourselves to strictures on that agency. Games are yoga for your agency.

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