

Games: Agency as Art. By C. THI NGUYEN. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. viii + 244. Price £22.99, US \$35.00.)

As the title elegantly expresses, this book begins with games, then follows the insight that there is an art of agency down many different lines of inquiry. Remarkably wide-ranging, the book is packed with observations on many topics of interest to philosophy of action, aesthetics and philosophy of art, social philosophy, art criticism, game studies, and game design.

Chapter 1 is a microcosm of the book itself, sketching the central account and its main implications. Nguyen's account of games draws heavily from Bernard Suits's much-discussed view, according to which 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (qtd. at p. 5). Nguyen observes that a Suitsian account of games suggests two forms of play. First, there is *achievement play*, where the players aim simply to win the game. Second, there is *striving play*, wherein we *invert* the motivational structure of our agency. When we act, we generally adopt a means for the sake of an end. By contrast, when we play games, we adopt an end for the sake of the means. We care only about what our actions are trying to achieve in the game (e.g., earning points) because we want to engage in the *process* of trying to achieve it. In striving play, what we care about, ultimately, is our struggle against those unnecessary obstacles. At the same time, the game ends we adopt are uniquely discardable: once the game is over, we cease to care about those ends, and return to our evaluatively richer lives. It is this unique agential structure and the ability of games to shape it that inform Nguyen's central claim: *games are an art form* that uses human agency as its medium.

Any not convinced by this initial sketch will find their concerns answered in chapter 2, where Nguyen defends the possibility of striving play against the notion that what makes games

valuable is the experience of winning. Chapter 3 continues to fill in the picture of striving play by presenting how a game player's agency is *layered*: the inner layer cares exclusively about in-game ends, while the outer layer retains a broader set of interests and values, including the aesthetic value of the inner layer's struggle in playing the game. Chapter 4 discusses how, by allowing us to adopt a variety of different ends and means of achieving them, playing many games can help develop individual autonomy by furnishing our *library of agency* with ways of acting and valuing that transfer to other contexts.

Chapters 5–7 situate games and striving play within aesthetics and art. Chapter 5 argues that games have a *distinctive* aesthetic value that cannot be reduced to the aesthetic qualities of other art forms, such as stories or rhetoric. In Chapter 6, Nguyen argues that the way in which we should experience games *as* works of art is distinctive from traditional art, given the essential contribution of the player's agency to complete the work. Chapter 7 continues this discussion by exploring how game designers overcome the *distance* that exists between them and the players.

Chapters 8–10 consider ways in which games can have socially and personally transformative effects. In chapter 8, this is explored in a positive light: games develop not just libraries of agencies, but also of *socialities*, that is to say, ways of relating to one another and alternate social systems, which could spur reflection on our social relations outside of the game. Chapter 9 turns to a possible danger of games through a discussion of *gamification*. Nguyen argues that importing game-like agency into other areas of life risks collapsing complex values to easily measured simplifications, which reduces difficult decisions into seductively clear and ultimately autonomy-erasing and value-thinning instrumentalism. The potential result is nothing short of 'moral catastrophe' (p. 193). Nguyen illustrates through cases of both intentional gamification – e.g., FitBit devices – and accidental gamification – e.g., research impact

frameworks. Chapter 10 concludes with some reflections on how striving play itself – though *not* achievement play – can help us learn to resist the seductions of gamifying our lives too far.

Nguyen thus covers a tremendous amount of philosophical ground in this excellent book. But there are two notable omissions that I wish to comment on.

Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that the dangers of gamification often arise without the intervention of human agents at all. Autonomous computer systems are essentially gamified systems, and they increasingly make decisions that affect human lives without direct human oversight – e.g., social media algorithms selecting stories to display, or predictive policing software choosing neighbourhoods to be patrolled. Computers are, in some sense, the ultimate achievement players: they have no outer layer of agency that cares about values outside the metrics to which they are programmed to attend. But unlike FitBits or even research impact frameworks, where the metrics are explicit to those directly affected by them, autonomous systems are often inscrutable and hidden behind impenetrable bureaucracy. The widespread adoption of these systems thus risks making all of us pawns in the banal games of artificial intelligences.

Secondly, absent from the book from the book is a discussion of popular tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Fate*, or *Apocalypse World*. While these games raise their own distinctive issues, TTRPGs intersect with Nguyen's account in interesting ways. For, unlike Suitsian games, TTRPGs frequently make their central activity – often conceived as collaborative story-telling – *easier*. Yet, playing TTRPGs shares many key features with striving play. When I play *D&D*, assuming the role of a hotheaded sorceress on a quest to plunder the evil wizard's tower for gold, I adopt forms of agency that are set by the game – to engage with the combat, exploration, and social mechanics the game provides, with

ends of succeeding in a series of dice games that represent and generate events in the fiction. These forms of agency are temporary and their ends discardable, and I adopt them for the sake of the struggle that emerges in play. But, interestingly, that struggle is one step removed: I make *my fictional character* struggle against obstacles I could easily remove by fiat, and it is precisely these arbitrary struggles that *facilitate* my telling of her story. Perhaps TTRPGs represent a case where our agency has another, deeper, fictional layer that is absent in other games.

Of course, Nguyen can point to his admission (p. 7) that he is only interested in Suitisian games as a philosophically interesting subset of games. Unlike Suits, Nguyen is not offering a *general* theory of games. But a consideration of TTRPGs, as a non-Suitisian game that offers another opportunity for striving play, enriches the bigger picture Nguyen has painted. Clearly, there is more to be done to understand the art of agency. Nguyen has set up the board, and the next move, dear reader, is yours.

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