Competition as Cooperation

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Abstract

Games have a complex, and seemingly paradoxical structure: they are both competitive and cooperative, and the competitive element is required for the cooperative element to work out. They are mechanisms for transforming competition into cooperation. Several contemporary philosophers of sport have located the primary mechanism of conversion in the mental attitudes of the players. I argue that these views cannot capture the phenomenological complexity of game-play, nor the difficulty and moral complexity of achieving cooperation through game-play. In this paper, I present a different account of the relationship between competition and cooperation. My view is a *distributed* view of the conversion: success depends on a large number of features. First, the players must achieve the right motivational state: playing for the sake of the struggle, rather than to win. Second, successful transformation depends on a large number of extra-mental features, including good game design, and social and institutional features.

Here is a strange truth about many competitive games: often, I must try quite hard to beat my opponent for them to have a good time. Such games have a complex and seemingly paradoxical structure: they are both competitive and cooperative, and the competitive element is required for the cooperative element to work out. We might even call them a social technology, capable of converting aggression into a social benefit and perhaps even a moral good.

Once we notice this transformative power of games, it seems something of a miracle. Several contemporary philosophers of sport have attempted accounts of how the transformation goes. Steven Weimer has located the primary mechanism of conversion in the consent of the players (Weimer 2012, 2014). Robert Simon has argued that there is no hostility in need of conversion at all; what seems to be competition is really a form of cooperative aid, as players help one another develop their skills and excellences (Simon 2014). Both these views locate the primary mechanism of conversion in the mental attitudes of the players. I believe both these views to be too simplistic; they cannot capture the phenomenological complexity of game-play, nor capture the difficulty of achieving cooperation through game-play. In this paper, I present a different account of the relationship between competition and cooperation. My view is a *distributed* view of the conversion: success depends on a large number of features. First, players must achieve a particular motivational state. But successful conversion will also depend on architectural features: features of game structure and design, and social and institutional features of a game's setting.

Finally, I will use this account to make a case that this conversion can be a primary function of some games and sports. This is in direct opposition to a prevailing view in the philosophy of sport: that the primary function of all sports is the development and display of various personal excellences.

Disposable Ends and Transformation

My view is built on the bones of Bernard Suits' account of games, with significant modifications. Playing a game, says Suits, is voluntarily undertaking obstacles for the sake of the activity they make possible (Suits 2005).[1] In a marathon, the point isn't simply to get to

the finish line. In fact, we usually don't actually care about being at that particular spot in and of itself. Otherwise, we would go about it more efficiently – we would take a shortcut, or a taxi. Similarly, the point of playing chess isn't simply to capture the king; I could do that more easily by reaching across the table and grabbing it while my opponent was distracted. In both cases, the point of playing the game is to achieve that goal under certain limitations.

'Obstacles' is meant here in a very loose sense; Suits includes physical obstacles, constraining rules, opponents, etc. Crucially, one way we take up these obstacles is by adopting arbitrary goals. In the game of mountaineering, I take up the goal of climbing to top of the mountain by the prescribed means (by hand and foot, no helicopters) (85-8). By taking up this goal, I thereby make features of the mountain into obstacles. This is an inversion of everyday practical reasoning. In normal practical action, we use a particular means because we want to reach an independently valuable end. But in Suitsian play, we adopt an arbitrary end for the sake of the means it forces us through.

This is the first step on the road to moral conversion. When I oppose you within a game, I provide some of those desirable obstacles. Just as adopting the ends and rules of mountaineering turn glaciers and rock walls into satisfying obstacles, adopting the ends and rules of basketball turns other people into satisfying obstacles. This is how games start to convert competition into cooperation: by positioning players properly within a structure such that one player's competitive acts provide the obstacles another player wishes to have.

But Suitsian play is not enough to ground a complete moral transformation. We need something more robust: what I will call 'striving play', defined thusly:

One engages in *striving play* when one takes on unnecessary goals and obstacles for the sake of the activity they make possible, and when one does so for the intrinsic value of being engaged in that activity or one's experience of being so engaged.

Notice that my definition of 'striving play' begins with Suits' original definition and then adds a requirement of intrinsic value. As Thomas Hurka notes, Suits' definition doesn't include a requirement for that the activity be intrinsic valuable. It only requires that a player take up the rules of the game just to make possible the activity of playing the game – why they value that activity is left open. A wholly professional poker player, who takes up the rules in order to be playing poker, and plays poker in order to win money, is still playing a game. Notes Hurka, Suits does discuss a requirement for intrinsic value in his final discussion of games in utopia, but this is an addition to his original definition (Hurka 2006, 226-8).

Furthermore, striving play requires that the intrinsic value arise from being *engaged* in the activity, rather than from successfully having completed the activity. If one values game-playing only when one has successfully overcome the obstacles and won, then one is not engaged in striving play. Striving play is done for the sake of struggling with obstacles, rather than for actually overcoming them. Striving play is done because the *process* is fascinating, fun, pleasurable, satisfying, or interesting. Let me be clear: I am not proposing that striving play is a necessary condition of playing games. Striving play is just one way in which we can play games, but it is a morally special one.

Some people take up the rules of the game in order to win at the game. Those people are not engaged in striving play. And because they value winning, their competition cannot be fully transformed into cooperation. In any oppositional game, one side will win and the other will lose; opponents are inextricably at cross-purposes on that count. But striving players take

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up the rules of the game just for the sake of having a struggle. Striving players can fully cooperate by competing, because they don't value winning itself, but only the struggle. Thus, only striving players can achieve a complete transformation of competition into cooperation.

But how is striving play really possible? The answer is in the motivational structure of game-play. Some Suitsian terminology will be useful here. For Suits, a *pre-lusory* goal is the description of the goal-state separate from the means of achievement: for example, the pre-lusory goal of basketball is getting the ball through the hoop. A *lusory* goal is achieving the pre-lusory goal by the prescribed means of the game: dribbling, with opponents on the court. For Suits, what it is to play a game is to pursue the lusory goal not for the sake of the independent value of the pre-lusory goal, but for the sake of the activity of pursuit. Thus, the pre-lusory goal is not an end in any normal sense. Making baskets, in and of itself, isn't valuable. But trying for baskets is the means to a desirable activity of playing basketball. From the strictly Suitsian account, we can extract the first moral addendum: if making the baskets – the pre-lusory goal – were a genuine end, then interfering with my opponents' attempts at the basket would be interfering substantively with their ends and their life. But making baskets isn't the actual end here, so there's nothing wrong with just with my blocking your shots.

But when I block your shot, I am not only interfering with your making baskets; I am also interfering with your pursuit of winning the game. This is where the difference between Suitsian play and striving play becomes crucial. It is perfectly compatible with Suits' definition that one play games for the sake of winning. But that motivation is excluded from my definition of striving play. In order for striving play to occur, I must be playing for the value of the activity of striving itself and not the value of winning.

Suitsian play gets us halfway from competition to cooperation. By competing with each other, we are cooperating in one sense, because we are each making possible the others' pursuit of winning. But, as long as winning is a genuine end, we are still antagonists. If what you really want is to win, then by competing with you, I'm blocking a genuine life goal of yours. But, on the other hand, if we are both engaged in striving play, then neither of us actually cares about winning. In fact, by trying to block your shot, I am helping you achieve your real end of having some excellent striving. Thus, striving play makes possible the complete conversion of competition into cooperation. It is a psychological achievement that makes games capable of creating special moral goods. And thus striving play, though not a definitional requirement of game-play, might be a social and moral ideal of game-play.

For striving play to be possible, it must be that I, as a practically reasoning entity, can have what we might call *disposable ends*. The possibility of disposable ends is already implicit in Suits' original account. In Suits, we pursue pre-lusory goals in order to make the game possible. Making baskets is not actually valuable, but I act as if they are in order to make the game possible. Striving play simply asks that we perform the same motivational two-step for winning. We act as if we care about winning, for the sake of being engaged in the game. For me, this usually looks like my inducing in myself a temporary care, which I set aside at the end of the game. But my relationship to that caring is strangely instrumental. I temporarily care about winning just so that I can be engaged in an excellent struggle.

But though this motivational state is required for full moral transformation, but it is not sufficient. Notice that the goods do not merely come from my opposing you; they come from your valuing a particular activity or experience of being opposed. And successfully achieving these goods will depend on a vast array of contingent psychological and social features. If we both value the activity of intellectual combat, but not physical combat, then playing chess will

generate goods for us, but boxing will not. If we take up the rules of boxing for the sake of having a difficult challenge, but our skills are wildly mismatched, we will also fail to generate the valued activity. But when the factors align, games offer a unique social possibility: one in which I may take my hostile and aggressive impulses and acts and, by placing them in the properly designed context, with the right people, turn them into something good. These extra-mental factors will emerge most clearly when we compare it to other standing views in the philosophy of sport.

Transformation and Consent

Let's start with Steven Weimer's contractualist view of sport morality. Weimer argues, as I do, that sports can morally transform seemingly violent acts, but Weimer takes consent to be the prime mover. Weimer's concern is to argue for the priority of consent in the morality of sport, against the view of internalism in sport. The internalist says that the norms of sport are generated by the purposes of sport: in Russell's famous account, this purpose is the promotion of human flourishing and excellence (Russell 2004). The consent account, on the other hand, says that the norms of sport are generated by the formal rules consented to by the players. Weimer grants that both consent and human flourishing are morally active in sport, but when they conflict, consent trumps. Suppose, for example, that violent retaliation in baseball would assist the promotion of athletic excellence, but all the players had explicitly agreed to forbid it; that consensual agreement should trump considerations of human flourishing. This is because the duty to fulfill one's contractual obligations trumps the lesser duty to promote the flourishing of others. If I have promised to pick you up from the airport, I cannot decide to abandon you and study mathematics instead because it would be a greater promotion of

human excellence (Weimer 2012, 19-26). Weimer's is also a conversion view. Consent does not merely neutralize wrongness; it flips hostile acts into positive goods of duty fulfillment. I am fulfilling my contractual obligations to you when I block your shot.

Under Weimer's view, the moral transformation in sports and games pivots on a single feature: the existence of consent. Notice how different this is from my disposable ends model, in which the transformation is non-binary, and depends for its success on a vast variety of contingent features such as game design, psychic fit, and the like.

Weimer's view seems to me quite problematic. Take the following scenario: I am an extremely good martial artist, and I enjoy going out of my way to crush and humiliate newbies. I find particularly cocky ones, obtain their consent, and proceed to crush and humiliate them. I know ahead of time that they won't enjoy it, but I pick out ones who are cocky enough to take me on despite my fame and great skill. Or, take another scenario: my spouse has angered me, and when people come over for board-game night, I suggest we play Diplomacy, which she has never played, which I suspect will cause her no end of psychic distress. She consents after hearing the rules, despite my warnings that she might not like it (as I guessed she would, such is the nature of her stubbornness) and is utterly miserable for the rest of the night.

Under Weimer's view, I am doing something good in both cases. My opponents have consented to the game, and so long as my actions are within the rules, then my strikes and lies are just the fulfillment of my duties. After all, consent is the trumping moral consideration. But this seems to me plainly wrong; I am doing something quite nasty with the boxing newbie and with my Diplomacy-hating spouse. What I'm doing would obviously be even worse if I hadn't even obtained their consent, but even with their consent, it is still problematic. I should have picked a different game that would have fit us better.

Weimer's consent model probably is the right way to think about the morality of physical harm in sports. If a boxer wishes to sue her opponent for having broken her nose, then the case will likely turn on whether the boxer actually consented to the match, and whether her opponent followed the rules. But physical harm is not the only thing at issue; there is also the question of whether or not we have cooperated in giving each other something valuable, and for that issue, we need to look to the qualities of the design of the rules, to the social edifices that surround the game. Appropriate fit to the particular game is crucial. Take Diplomacy, in which various players lie, swindle, and connive in a series of personal interactions. Some players thrive on this; others cannot stand having their friends lie to their faces, and find the experience miserable. It can also depend on getting a proper match of the players' skill levels. If I am vastly better than you at chess, you will be crushed by me, and if this is not a satisfying experience for you, then no moral transformation has occurred. Under my model, my attempts to oppose you are not automatically transformed by the mere fact that we have consented to a game. Rather, the transformation only happens if one successfully creates desirable striving. And that depends on finding appropriate opponents, fit to one's skill level and to the particular game we are playing. In informal situations, this means proper selection of game and player. In formal situations, this means, among other things, having good ranking and matching systems.

As Russell notes, consent is required for a boxing match to be a boxing match – without consent, it is simply a beating (Russell 2004, 147). But merely qualifying as a boxing match is not morally exhaustive. If my friend consents to a match with me, and over the course of it we discover that I am much better than him – that he is simply getting pummeled in a painful and humiliating way – I would be perfectly within my rights to continue the game. But it would even better to call it off and go find some other game to play.

Perhaps the difference between these two accounts of moral transformation is clearest when we look at who is responsible for the moral transformation. In Weimer's view, responsibility is local and wholly determined by the players' consent and fulfillment of their duties. My view, on the other hand, allows for the possibility that players could consent to the game and fulfill their duties, but still fail to produce the goods of moral conversion. First, some of the players may lack the attitude of striving play and thus fail to achieve moral conversion. Second, much of the heavy lifting is being done by the game's design, by the way it channels aggression into interesting obstacles. It is quite possible to design a game that doesn't transform my strikes into any interesting or pleasurable striving for my opponent. There are certainly very bad games we can imagine designing and agreeing to play, perhaps in a fit of drunken faux-inspiration: an insult contest, where we insult each other until one of us cries, or a whipping contest, where we whip each other until one of us says uncle. Third, more heavy lifting is being done by contingent features of psychological alignment, and so, in turn, on features of the social superstructure of game-play, that makes such alignment more possible: the ranking and match-making system, for example. This is why I call it an architectural and distributed account of moral transformation in games – the transformation is crucially dependent on architectural features of game design, and the social structure of the gaming environment.[2]

Striving and Excellence

The novelty of the architectural account will be even clearer when we compare it to another close relative. Let's turn to a recent debate about whether sports are productive or zero-sum activities. This is a slightly different way of framing a very similar core question

about the moral worth of competition in games and sport. If the point of games is winning, the worry goes, then they must be zero-sum – for if one person wins, the other loses, and whatever value has accrued to the winner is at the same time deducted from the loser. Therefore games are, at best, a worthless activity. Robert Simon argues against that view; his view and mine are, on their surface, quite similar. Sports, says Simon, are not a zero-sum activity because they are not a competition at all. Winning is not the purpose of sports. Rather, says Simon, the purpose of a sport is to develop and display one's abilities and excellences. One might be elated by a difficult win because it demonstrates excellence, but winning is only an indicator that one has actually performed excellently. Thus, sports are an essentially cooperative activity – a mutual quest for excellence. (Simon 2014, 36).

Kretchmar criticizes this 'mutual quest' view. Says Kretchmar, Simon's view doesn't take seriously enough the degree to which athletes care about winning. Athletes want to actually win, and so sports are not really cooperation at all. Kretchmar offers us three arguments. First, competitors do not simply want to strive, they want to have won – they want to possess the victory. Second, cooperative accounts sound like the *ex post facto* rationalization of losers. And third, cooperative accounts lack what Kretchmar calls 'redemptive force'. Only when we conceive of winning as genuinely important, can we account for the drama of sport – for the possibility of a loser redeeming themselves the next time (Kretchmar 2012).

Kretchmar's view has some bite, because Simon's view seems false of the actual experience of playing sports. If the sole intention of sports is developing and displaying athletic excellence rather than winning, then our in-game actions ought to be guided by these goals rather than by merely winning. If winning is merely the *measure* of excellence, and the activity of competing is solely the mutual pursuit of excellence, then much of what I do in games is nonsensical. For example: in basketball, if I have an easy two point shot and a very difficult

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and complex possibility of a lay-up, under Simon's view I should go for the lay-up: if I pull it off, I will have displayed more athletic excellence, and if I haven't, trying the harder path will have been more developmentally useful. One might repair this point for Simon by shifting his view from athletic excellence to something like, say, competitive excellence – in which case taking the easy, less athletic shot would count as a competitive excellence. But then a deeper problem looms. And if basketball is a cooperative activity solely in virtue of its being a mutual quest for excellence, then helping my opponents achieve excellence should be on my mind, and the intentional object of my activity. A genuine mutual quest for excellence would look something like this: we would take turns setting up very difficult situations for each other, that were just hard enough to be challenging and developmentally useful, but within reach, for the sake of displaying excellence. And such things sound familiar: they're called 'training'. The problem with Simon's view is that it doesn't distinguish adequately between *playing* and *training*. His view attributes to players a uniform intention – one that is cooperative all the way down. That is the motivational structure of a training session. When teammates train together, they take turns offering each other just the right level of challenge to let the other person develop and shine.

But the architectural model can do better against Kretchmar's criticisms, precisely because it attributes a more complex psychological structure to striving play. Under the architectural model, a player does not have uniform intentions. We may enter into a game with cooperative intentions, but once we are inside, we no longer have to maintain them. We may turn all our efforts to winning, albeit within the rules. The difference between games and ordinary life is that in ordinary life, we must usually intend to help other people in order to actually help them. In games, the very structure of the game permits us to be entirely competitive and aggressive; yet the game will transform these efforts into something worthwhile for our

opponents. Games permit us to offload our cooperative intention into the structure of the game itself. That is, I need to ensure beforehand that I have a good game, one that can perform the moral transformation, and that I have an opponent for which I have a good fit. Once I have done this, I can check my cooperative intentions at the door and simply play to win, trusting in the game to make things good.

Both Weimer's and Simon's accounts place the heaviest load on mental features of the players. Weimer's depends on the consent of the parties, and Simon's on consistently cooperative intentions. The architectural theory, on the other hand, off-loads the heavy lifting to structural features of game design and social arrangement. Some of these features may occur intentionally, but they don't have to. If I arrive at the appropriate fit accidentally, the moral transformation will happen, whether I intended it to or not. Similarly, the architectural theory does not depend on cooperative impulses from all involved. True story: more than once, somebody has brought a belligerent, hyper-competitive, aggressive, and generally unpleasant guest to my house, who has proceeded to ruin all conversation and socializing. I have, in an attempt to salvage what I can from the evening, produced a board game. The unpleasant guest gleefully takes up the game and attempts to childishly destroy other people in a spirit of hyper-competitiveness. But the rest of us can now enjoy ourselves, for the architecture of the game is converting his hostility into something interesting and pleasurable for us, even though he has no intention of giving us any such pleasure. This also makes clear that architectural conversion depends on the proper motivational set-up of the recipient of hostility, and not necessarily of the aggressor.

Game designer and critic JC Lawrence says, 'In competitive games, I get to approximate the platonic ideal of an entirely selfish and self-centeredly manipulative creature, one bereft of every social grace and principle, and to thereby learn to solve interesting problems. What's

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not to like?' (Lawrence 2014). He is getting at a truth here that the more idealistic and kind-hearted view pushed by Simon does not. Games have a very interesting moral structure. We can enter into them, and so long as we hold ourselves to the rules of the game, we can unleash our hostility. We can be as relentlessly and aggressively competitive as we wish, and rely on the game itself to turn that into cooperation. For Simon, morality in a game is just like morality in regular life – we have to intend to be good people. In my picture, games are a kind of *moral technology* – the game architecture itself does much of the work. And so games can offer a temporary phenomenological relief from the burdens of being moral while still, on the larger scale, satisfy those very moral obligations.

Let's return to the question of whether games are zero-sum or productive. The architectural model yields a complex answer: it depends on whether the players are engaged in striving play, whether they are properly aligned, and whether the game design is good. If the players are strivers, and if the game is well-designed and appropriately fit, then the game can be productive. If these conditions don't hold, then the game will not be fully productive. If the players are aligned as Kretchmar describes and care about the win permanently, enduringly, and non-disposably, then the game will be zero-sum. And mixtures of different player motivations are available. If that nasty houseguest cares entirely about winning, then the game will only be good for him if he wins, and bad if he loses. But if I only care about engaging in striving, and the game is well-chosen, then the game will be good for me whether I win or lose.

But there are some more interesting details to work out. Let's return to Kretchmar's arguments. First, on the possibility of redemptive force: Kretchmar seems to be arguing that the experience of drama and redemption in sports is only possible if winning is a real end and not a disposable one. I do not think this is right; in order to account for this under my

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analysis, we need only adjust the scope of what we are treating as a game. Suppose I am in an intramural soccer league. I find that, when I adopt the end of winning over the course of many seasons, I have a very enjoyable and dramatic experience of loss and redemption. In order for the end to be disposable, I do not have to treat it as sharply time-delimited – that is, I do not have to dispose of it at the end of each particular game. It simply has to be the case that that end is not attached to my other, enduring interests – that I take up that end for the sake of experiencing the activity it brings about. And if we care, disposably, about winning for the sake of experiencing this dramatic arc, then this is also striving play.

Kretchmar's other significant argument was that players actually care about the win as a possession; it matters to them, after the game, that they had won. If one wants not merely to strive, but to possess the victory, then winning counts as an enduring personal interest, and is not disposable. They want the win for the sake of having won, not for the sake of engaging in striving. I grant that people do in fact play games this way, and that for them, games will be zero-sum and they will not achieve a complete moral conversion. What I do not grant is that the winning-oriented players are going about things in an objectively better way than striving-oriented players. I do not grant that sports are *essentially constituted* as activities for winners rather than strivers. Certain institutions of sports may be so constituted, but not the particular sports themselves, and not the general practice of playing sports. To see why, let's consider the purpose of sport.

The function of moral transformation

I take this moral transformation to be one of the functions of sport and other games. This claim is in stark contrast to the claim that function of sport is the development, exercise,

and/or testing of various excellences. That latter view usually emerges alongside a discussion

of broad internalism: the view there is an ethos or purpose to a sport, behind its rules, which

can provide normative guidance where the explicit rules do not (Russell 2004; Simon 2000).

This ethos is usually identified in terms of some kind of personal development. This further

claim is not part of the definition of broad internalism, but seems, as a matter of fact, to be

held by most broad internalists. Simon's description of the ethos of sport is representative:

> …Sports are arenas in which we test ourselves against others, where we attempt to learn and grow
> through our performances, and where we attempt to develop and exhibit excellence at overcoming the
> sport-specific obstacles created by the rules. (10)

The list is notable in its self-orientation. Players, if we are to take this list as exhaustive,

are in it for themselves. Lurking underneath, it seems to me, is some sort of egoistic social

contractualism: I want to develop and exhibit my excellences, and you want to develop and

exhibit yours, so we form an agreement to box. Now we are fighting as part of a contractually

obligated exchange of services. I do not wish to quibble with the general view that sports can

have an ethos. I only wish to quibble with the claim that the ethos of sports is, particularly and

exclusively, the development of excellence. The social, cooperative function is just as plausible

a candidate for filling out that ethos as any self-oriented developmental view.

In support of his developmental internalism, Simon points to an 'analysis, perhaps most

famously developed by Suits, [that] sports, qua games, have rules that create obstacles simply

for the purpose of challenging the competitors.' Notice that Simon has added something to the

Suitsian definition – Simon has fixed the purpose as a *challenge*. Suits never says this. Suits'

account is, explicitly, that playing a game is taking up unnecessary obstacles 'for the sake of

the activity they make possible' (Suits 2005, 55). Suits is silent on the why one might want

such an activity. Certainly, it could be for the sake of personal development. But other

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motivations are also possible: hedonism, for one. And Suits is silent on whether those values are for oneself, or for others. But this is not intended to devolve into bickering scholarship about Suits himself. Rather, I intend to broach the possibility that sports, and other games, have been built for purposes other than simply personal development: for personal enjoyment and other forms of satisfaction, and, perhaps most magnificently of all, for converting one's hostile and aggressive impulses into the satisfactions of another. The idea that sports could be used for such social functions should be perfectly acceptable for the sort of value anti-realism about sports and games, such as advanced by Morgan and by Ciomaga, that permits the same game to be taken up in different circumstances for different reasons (Morgan 2004; Ciomaga 2013). But I think I can also make a case to the internalist. The internalist is a realist about the value of sports. She thinks that sports have a particular function, which grounds their value and generates norms for the players. I would like to argue to such an internalist that moral conversion and hedonism are just as viable candidates for the function of sports as personal development.

First, it would obviously be an overreach to think that all games were for personal development. Obviously, games of pure chance are not, nor are those joyously stupid drinking games. Let me follow Simon's lead and focus on sports, conceived of as games which are contests of physical skill (Simon 2000, 9). Simon and others seem to move immediately from the claim that sports are contests of physical skill to the conclusion that their primary function is developing, displaying, or ranking excellence (9-10; Kretchmar 2005). But I do not think that conclusion follows so easily.

Suppose my wife and I like to play sports together. As it happens, she is far better at tennis and I am far better at basketball, and in neither case can we have a decent game. We discover, to our delight, that we are equally good at racquetball, and we proceed to play

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frequently, keeping apace with each other, and having very enjoyable games. Imagine I help out a stranger one day, who turns out to be a racquetball pro. The pro offers to give me free lessons, but I decline, for if I took those lessons, I would advance past my wife and we would no longer have our very enjoyable close racquetball games. I take it that, in this case, I have chosen the pursuit of (collective) pleasure over the pursuit of excellence. According to the self-oriented internalist, what I've done here is a violation of the ethos of the sport and the objective norms that arise from the sport. And this seems very strange indeed, for I cannot see why what I've done is wrong.

The self-oriented internalist will presumably reply: these social considerations are external to the sport itself. They will say that, when we look to the sport itself, to its rules and constructions, we will see that, really, the ethos of the sport is for personal excellence. When I am refusing to develop my racquetball skills to their maximal excellence, I am sacrificing the internal norms of the sport for external considerations; I am using and abusing the sport for my own ends. But I do not see why the self-oriented internalist should be permitted this claim. For one, I might attempt the opposite charge: that sports are designed for enjoyment, satisfaction, and the diversion of negative energies into positive social goods, and that the skills-and-rankings obsession is a peculiar modern perversion, confined to a relatively small number of strangely obsessive, and largely professional, players. A cheap shot: James Naismith says that he invented basketball during a New England blizzard to keep a bunch of bored, cooped up, rowdy kids from roughhousing (Martin 2015).

Interestingly, the philosophy of sport has taken professional and Olympic sports as its paradigmatic cases, which are the best cases for an ethos of the development of excellence. But why should we take the Olympics to be the paradigmatic case of playing sports, rather than, say, a casual pick-up game of basketball with my friends after work? Elite sports are

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played between strangers who are selected for their exceptional degree of skill. We hold the sport fixed, and then find the players. But sports for the rest of us – sports in friendly life, in family life – is often utterly different. We hold the people fixed, and find the appropriate sport to play. If I am four foot tall and you are Michael Jordan, and we have an afternoon to pass together, then we should probably skip the one-on-one basketball and play darts.

Of course, the self-oriented internalist will likely insist that casual play is an aberration, a mere using of sports for some external end. But this presupposes that elite sports are to be taken as paradigmatic over casual sports. It is not clear to me what there is in the rules of basketball – the dribbling rules, the rules of shooting, the three point shot – that make the elite version more conceptually central. The internalist will insist that the internal logic of the sport is about a pure pursuit of excellence, and that using sports as a cooperative act among intimates, is a perversion of sport. But we could just as easily tell the opposite story: that sports are a kind of cooperative activity, built around and arising from play between friends and family and intimates, that, for reasons external to the game, have been perverted by certain institutions into supposedly objective systems of ranking, for quite external reasons: ego, national pride, cash money. Annette Baier has suggested that moral theory has long taken as its paradigm professional relationships between strangers of relatively equal power. But so much of moral life emerges from intimate family life, in relationships between people of unequal power – parents and children, breadwinner and dependent. Social contract theory, says Baier, smells of the male perspective (Baier 1986, 240-53). Much of the philosophy of sport has the same smell about it, taking sporting acts between strangers, rather than between intimates, as paradigmatic.

Let me return to the narrower point. I do not see why, from the fact that the rules of a sport encourage skilled interactions, what decides what those skilled interactions are for.

Suppose that an account like Kretchmar's is right, and that we can, by analyzing the rules of most sports, discover that the purpose of the sport is to produce skilled physical interchanges (Kretchmar 2005). What is the value of having these skilled interactions? There are at least two possible accounts. Under a developmental account, the value of sports is in developing real skills – the more, the better. But one might, instead, value sports for the activity or experience of struggling itself. Let's call the latter the Sisyphean account, after Richard Taylor's comment that all Sisyphus needs to have a meaningful life is that he also happens to have the desire to roll a rock up a hill (Taylor 1999).

Let us suppose that I, Thi, am a developmentalist who values being highly skilled, and suppose my twin, Iht, is a Sisyphean who values the experience of developing skills and the activity of struggling against a difficult opponent. Suppose a mad scientist makes us the following offer: he will administer a very safe local memory-deleter, that will abolish any skills we've developed at badminton over the last month and give us a fresh dose monthly. Thi will absolutely refuse, for there will be no actual development of skills; Iht should leap on this chance, for he will get to have that particularly delicious experience of being on the early part of the learning curve and advancing quickly over and over again. Or: suppose that Thi and Iht are both at the very top of their respective sports. They each find out about a secretive and very successful training regimen that will push them well past the rest of their competition, to a lifetime of easy wins (it involves yoga and coconut shakes). Thi should take this training regimen, for the sake of being the most skilled. Iht may reasonably reject it, fearing that he will lose the particular activity of desperate, difficult play.

What in the rules of games forces the developmental over the Sisyphean? The fact that games offer points and victories for the deployment of skill will not decide, for both accounts fit that structure equally well. The developmentalist can read this as a test of actual skill,

where the Sisyphean can read this as a lusory goal adopted for the sake of having a difficult struggle. Thus, the fact that a game is structured to support competition and skilled interaction does not decide whether the valuation is developmental or a Sisyphean. Furthermore, if I am Sisyphean, nothing in those facts will decide whether I am in it for myself, or in it for everybody's sake. The view that games are built as an engine for converting aggression or hostility into valuable activities or experiences is just as plausible a candidate as the developmental view.

Perhaps we might point to other feature of games that tilt the reading one way or another. Certain external social structures certainly do. The social context into which the Olympics is embedded – the ranking and winnowing – certainly suggests that the Olympics is for personal development. But the context of, say, intramural frisbee golf, suggests a much more social function. And perhaps we might point to certain particular features of one sport that suggest one function over another. But the mere fact that a game encourages skilled encounters will not, by itself, do the job. Thus, at least from the features usually alluded to by internalists, the functions of hedonism, moral transformation, and personal development are all equally good explanations of the rules.

Conclusion

Games, including sports, have the capacity to embed competition within a larger cooperative structure. Other models tend to view this cooperation as the direct result of player intention. I have claimed something much more complicated. Player consent and player intention are, of course, important. But also important are features of game design, and the social context of game design. The players must fit the game and the other players. Players cannot merely intend to cooperate; they must achieve a certain special motivational state –

having disposable ends – and then successfully pick the right game, and the right players. The moral responsibility for this transformation, then, is not only on the individual players. It is also on the game designer and on the social infrastructure which brings players together.

Games are a piece of social technology, which, when played with the appropriate players and the right attitude in the right context, can enable something of a moral miracle. They are places where a player can, to some limited extent, check their morality at the door, to permit themselves to be aggressive and competitive, and let architectural features of the game transform that aggression into desirable activities. But this transformation is delicate. It is not automatic, and certainly not guaranteed for all instances of game-play. But it is a source of norms about game play. We should seek a disposable attitude towards ends, and we should seek well-designed games and games that fit us, precisely because these enable the transformation of competition into cooperation.

Endnotes

1. I reject Suits' claim that his account is a complete definition of games. I have argued that it is, instead, a good account of one specific kind of game-play (Nguyen forthcoming).

2. For an application of these ideas to specific issues in the ethics of online gaming, see (Nguyen and Zagal 2016).

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