

Games: Agency as Art

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Chapter 1

Agency as Art

Games can seem like an utterly silly way to spend one's time. We struggle and strain and sweat — and for what? The goals of games seem so utterly arbitrary. Game players burn energy and effort, not on curing cancer or saving the environment, but on trying to beat each other at some unnecessary, invented activity. Why not spend that time on something real?

But the goals of a game aren't actually arbitrary at all. They only seem arbitrary when we look in the wrong place. In the rest of life, we are used to justifying our goals by looking at the value of the goals themselves, or by looking to forward, to what follows from those goals. But with the goals of games, often we need to look *backwards*. We need to look at the value of the activity of pursuing those goals. In ordinary practical life, we usually take the means for the sake of the ends. But in games, we can take up an end for the sake of the means. Playing games can be a *motivational inversion* of ordinary life.

Seeing this motivational structure will also help us to understand the essential nature of games. A game tells us to take up a particular goal. It designates abilities for us to use in pursuing that goal. It packages that all up with a set of obstacles, crafted to fit those goals and abilities. A game uses all these elements to sculpt a form of activity. And when we play games, we take on an alternate form of agency. We take on new goals and accept different

sets of abilities. We give ourselves over to different — and focused — way of inhabiting our own agency. Goals, ability, and environment: these are the means by which the game designer practices their art. And flexing our own agency to fit — that is how we experience the game designer’s art.

Games, then, are a unique social technology. They are a method for inscribing forms of agency into artifactual vessels: for recording them, preserving them, and passing them around. And we possess a special ability: we can be fluid with our agency, and submerge ourselves in alternate agencies designed by another. In other words, we can use games as to communicate forms of agency. Games are part of our human practices of inscription. Painting lets us record sights, music lets us record sounds, stories lets us record narrative, and games let us record agencies. That can be useful as part of our development. Just as novels let us experiences lives we have not lived, games let us experience forms of agency we might not have discovered on our own. But those shaped experiences of agency can be valuable in themselves, as art.

Consider *Sign*, a product of the avant-garde wing of role-playing games (Hymes and Seyalioglu 2015). It’s a live-action role-playing 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, whose goal was to teaching those children to lip-read. Instead, the children collectively and spontaneously invented their own sign language. In the game *Sign*, the players take up the roles of those children. The game assigns each player a backstory, and an inner truth that they have always wanted to communicate. 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 a new sign language, which the players will invent during the game. There are three rounds. In each round, every player invents a single sign and teaches it to the other players. Then, all players attempt to have a freeform conversation, desperately struggling to communicate through their tiny inventory of signs. Invented signs get used and modified; new signs evolve spontaneously from old signs. Communication happens painfully and slowly, with the occasional rare and luminous breakthrough. And every time you feel that you are misunderstood, or do not understand somebody else, you must take a marker and make a "compromise mark" on your hand.

The experience of the game is utterly marvelous. It is intense, absorbing, frustrating, and surprisingly emotional. But to have that experience, the player must commit, temporarily, to the goal of communicating their particular inner truth. And that commitment, combined with the particular rules of the game, leads to a very concentrated practical experience. To play *Sign* is to become utterly absorbed in the practical details of inventing language and stabilizing meanings.

Here, then, is the particular motivational state of game playing which I wish to investigate. The rules of the game tell us to care about something and we start caring about it. A board game instructs us to care about collecting one color of token. A video game tells us to care about stomping on little mushroom people. A sport tells us to get a ball in a net. In order to achieve that cherished state of absorbed play, we let that goal occupy our consciousness, for a while. And the fact that the game designer specifies goals and abilities

for the player to take on — that is precisely what makes games distinctive as an art form.¹

Frameworks and approaches

My interest here is in uncovering the unique potential and the special value of games. There have been, in recent years, many arguments for the value and importance of games. In many cases, however, these arguments tend to avoid looking at some of the more unique qualities of games. Instead, they assimilate games to some other, more respectable category of human practice. We've seen arguments that games are art because they are a type of fiction (Tavinor 2009). We've seen arguments that games are a type of cinema, that adds a new technique — interactivity — to the familiar lexicon of cinematic techniques (Gaut 2010). We've seen arguments that games are a kind of conceptual art, that is valuable when it offers social critique (Flanagan 2013). We've seen arguments that games can be a special way of making arguments, with can criticize economic and political systems by simulating them (Frasca 2003; Bogost 2010). And surely, games can function in these ways. Many modern video games surely are a kind of fiction and a kind of interactive cinema. And games can, as Ian Bogost puts it, function as a kind of procedural rhetoric, making arguments by modeling causal systems in the world. But I worry that overemphasizing these sorts of approaches may also suppress our appreciation and understanding of the truly unique potential of games.²

¹ For simplicity's sake, I will speak as if there is a singular game designer, when in actuality, games are often designed in large teams.

² My account is moderately aligned, in spirit, with those scholars who call themselves 'ludologists', who argue that games are a unique category and should be studied as such. For surveys of ludology, and of the debate between narratology and ludology, see (Nguyen 2017c) and (Kirkpatrick 2011, 48-86). For key texts of ludology, see (Aarseth 1997; Frasca 1999; Eskelinen 2001). I differ from some of the classic positions in

Over in the philosophy of sport, the value of game playing is usually spelled out in terms of skills, excellences, and achievements. But notice that this also cashes out the value of games in some very familiar currency. For example, Tom Hurka argues that games are valuable because they enable difficult achievements. But difficult achievements are, obviously, not confined to games. Curing cancer and inventing a better mousetrap would also be difficult achievements, and they would give us something useful, besides. This leads Hurka to conclude that playing games is generally less valuable than engaging in more useful non-game activities. Science and philosophy are valuable in the same way as games, in offering difficult achievements, but also valuable other ways. They give us a truth and understanding, or at least some useful tools, as well as difficulty. Games can offer us only difficulty (Hurka 2006). Games might truly come into their own, says Hurka, once we've solved all our practical problems and entered some sort of techno-futurist Utopia. But in the meantime, we're probably better off doing something more useful with our lives. Notice that Hurka's conclusion arises precisely because he thinks games are valuable in virtue of something rather commonplace — difficulty — rather than in virtue of something unique. Thus, the value of games is easily superseded by the value of other, equally difficult but more practical activities.

All these approaches miss much of what's special about games. Games, I will argue, are a distinctive art form. They offer us access to a unique artistic horizon and a distinctive set of social goods. They are special, as an art, because they engage with human practicality — with our ability to decide and do. And they are special, as a practical activity, precisely because they are an art. In ordinary life, we have to struggle to deal with whatever the

ludology in many of the details. In particular, see Chapters 3-6 .

world throws at us, with whatever means we happen to have lying around. In ordinary life, the form of our struggle is usually forced on us by an indifferent and arbitrary world. In games, on the other hand, the form of our practical engagement is intentionally and creatively configured by the game's designers. In ordinary life, we have to desperately fit ourselves to the practical demands of the world. In games, we can engineer the world of the game, and the agency we will occupy, to fit us and our desires. Struggles in games can be carefully shaped in order to be interesting, fun, or even beautiful for the struggler.

This is enabled, in significant part, by the peculiar nature of our in-game ends. Games ends are extremely different from the sorts of ends we stand behind in ordinary life. Our values, in ordinary life, are largely recalcitrant. Much of what we value seems universal and immovable. We value life, freedom, and happiness. Even with our personal values, there's typically little short-term flex. I care about art, creativity, and philosophy. Changing my core values would take, at the very least, significant time and effort. My basic values are thick and recalcitrant. But game activity is different. We can change our in-game ends easily and fluidly. We can adopt new ends, which will guide our actions for the duration of the game, and then drop them in an instant. When we play games, we take on temporary agencies — temporary sets of abilities and constraints, along with temporary ends. We have a significant capacity for agential fluidity, and games make full use of that capacity.

Suits and striving

Why think we have this strange capacity for agential fluidity? The best place to start is Bernard Suits' analysis of games. Let's start with what Suits calls the "portable version" of

his definition (Suits 2005, 55):

Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

In a marathon, the point isn't simply to get to the finish line. Usually, we don't actually care about being at that particular spot, in and of itself. We know because we don't try to get there as efficiently as possible. We don't take shortcuts, and we don't take a taxi. The whole point is to get there within certain limitations. Suits contrasts game playing with what he calls 'technical activity'. In technical activity, there is some end that we value, and we pursue it because of the value of that end. Since that end is genuinely valuable, we try to pursue it as efficiently as we can. But in games, we don't take the most efficient route to our in-game ends. In game-playing, we try to achieve some specified end under certain specified inefficiencies. The end is largely valuable only when achieved inside those constraints. We can tell that this is our motivational structure, precisely because we are willing to set up blockades to that end. By itself, getting a ball through a stupid little basket has no independent value on its own. I don't go to the basketball court after hours with a ladder and spend hours passing the ball through the hoop; nor do I pull out my *Monopoly* set by myself, and roll myself around in heaps of Monopoly money, glorying in all that I command. Getting the ball through the hoop or holding Monopoly money in my hand is worthless, outside of the constraints and structure of the game.

We must distinguish here carefully here between the *goals* of a game and our *purpose* in playing a game. The goal of a game is the target we aim at during the game: getting to the finish line first, making more baskets, maximizing points. Our purpose with a game, on the

other hand, is our reason for playing the game in the first place. Our purpose in playing a game might be to have some fun, or to get some exercise, to de-stress, to develop our skills, to vanquish our opponents, achieve some difficult task, or even to experience the beauty of our own skilled action.

For some game players, goal and purpose can be one and the same. A professional poker player is just in it for the money; a Olympic sprinter just wants to be win, period — for these players, the goal is the purpose. Winning is genuinely valuable for them. For other game players, the goal and purposes are distinct, but the achieving the purpose follows from achieving the goal in a straightforward way. This basketball player wants to win for the sake of fame and status; this *Starcraft 2* professional wants to win the tournament for the prize money. For these types of players, winning is only a means to their true purpose, but it is still genuinely valuable to them.

What Suits exposes, however, is another, entirely different motivational structure: that our goal and purpose in a game might be entirely skew to one another. When I play a party game with my friends, my goal is to win, but my purpose is to have fun. The way to have fun is to try, during the game, to win. But I don't really care if I win or not — not in any lasting way. I have to *chase* the goal of winning to fulfill my purpose, but I don't actually need to win in order to have fun. Winning, in this case, is rather incidental to my true purpose. In fact, if I start up a game of Charades for the sake of a little fun, but I am so aggressive and competitive that I make everybody else miserable, then I may have succeeded in achieving the goals of the game, but I have failed entirely in my purpose.

Suits took himself to be offering a complete account of games and game playing. For this he has been roundly criticized. There are, as many have pointed out, aspects of game

playing that do not conform to Suits' theory. Some games involve no real struggle against obstacles at all, such as certain children's games of make believe. Certain narratively oriented tabletop roleplaying games like *Fiasco*, and narrative computer games, like *The Stanley Parable*, also don't seem oriented around struggles and obstacles. I agree with these criticisms. I do not think Suits has provided a complete account of all forms of game playing.³ But we should not throw away Suits' analysis entirely, just because he failed in his stated goal. Let us adapt Suits' analysis and treat it, instead, as an exceedingly insightful description of one particular — but very important — form of game play. For the remainder of this book, I will focus on understanding those games and playings that fit the Suitsian definition.⁴ For the sake of brevity, whenever I simply use the bare term 'game', please take me to be referring to Suitsian games.

A more significant worry is that Suitsian play is necessarily immature and unworthy of serious attention. Suitsian games always involve practical struggles. We become absorbed in the instrumental activity of overcoming obstacles and achieving seemingly arbitrary goals. And it is precisely these aspects that can make game playing seem like a lesser activity. For example, media critic Andrew Darley 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

³ Criticism of Suits on this point is a common refrain; see (Upton 2015, 16) for a representative example. I provide an extended analysis of the relationship between make believe play and striving play in, and an argument against Suits' account as being a complete one of games, in (Nguyen forthcoming).

⁴ Some readers may agree with me that Suitsian games are only one type of game; others might think that all games are Suitsian games. My argument should be palatable to both. Even those Wittgensteinians who maintain that the term 'game' is essentially indefinable should be able to find my analysis somewhat palatable, by treating the category of 'Suitsian games' as an artificial stipulation. I'm not particularly interested in the question of I am not interested in debating whether or not the category of Suitsian games does or does not match up with some bit of natural language; I am interested in the fact that the category is clearly specified, useful, and clearly applies to some of our activities.

mechanisms ... leaving little room for reflection other than an instrumental type of thinking that is more or less commensurate with their own workings” (Darley 2000; Lopes 2010, 117). The same worry recurs in the new wave of games scholarship, even among some of games’ most ardent defenders. These scholars often argue for the worth of games by pointing out how games can offer us rich content, beyond mere instrumental challenges. Such arguments often proceed by highlighting games’ capacity to represent. For example, Ian Bogost argues for the value of games by showing that games can be a form of rhetoric, making arguments via their ability to simulate the world. Bogost points to games like *The McDonald’s Game*. In that game, you run the McDonald’s corporation. Your goal is to maximize profits while protecting the environment. But when you play the game, you quickly discover that you actually pull off both of these goals. The game argues, through its simulation, that the goals of capitalism and the goals of environmentalism are essentially at odds (Bogost 2010, 28-31). John Sharp reserves his highest praise for those games that move beyond the “hermetically sealed” experiences of merely solving the game, and instead represent and comment on the world. Sharp highlights games like Mary Flanagan’s game *Career Moves*. *Career Moves* resembles that old family game, *The Game of Life*, but forces the player to make stereotypically gendered career choices for their female character, in order to bring the player to reflect on gender biases in the workplace (Sharp 2015, 77-97). Flanagan herself praises Gonzolo Frasca’s game *September 12th: A Toy World*, a pointedly political game in which one plays the United States dropping bombs by drone on an unnamed Middle-Eastern locale, attempting to kill terrorists, only to find that all their efforts only destroy the innocent civilians and increase the number of terrorists (Flanagan 2013, 239-40).

Notice that these sorts of accountings pick out a very particular type of game as genuinely respectable. *September 12th*, *Career Moves*, and *The McDonald's Game* may not present very interesting instrumental challenges, but that is unimportant by these lights. These games are good in virtue of what they represent. Underneath all these approaches seems to be the presumption that Suitsian play — the play of skills and clearly defined goals — cannot be valuable in any really deep or fulfilling way. These accounts seem motivated by the need to find some other footing from which to establish the value of games.

But I think we ought not dismiss instrumental play so quickly. That dismissal arises, I think, from misunderstanding the richly varied motivational structures involved in game playing. Let's return to the distinction between goals and purposes. The distinction helps us see that there are two very different modes of play. First, you might be playing for the sake of winning. Either you want the win for its own sake or for the sake of something that follows from winning, like goods and money.⁵ Let's call this *achievement play*. Professional poker players who play for money, Olympic athletes who play for honor, and people who simply play to win are all achievement players. In achievement play, goal and purpose are aligned. Alternately, you might be pursuing the win for the sake of the struggle. Let's call

⁵ It should be noted that "winning" here is slightly imprecise. There are many other sorts of states we can pursue in games. For example, one might have lost the opportunity to actually win in particular chess match, but one can still play on, aiming to achieve a stalemate rather than an outright loss. For another, as Suits points out, many games don't have victory condition, but only loss conditions. For example: a ping pong volley, where we try to keep the ball going as long as possible, has no win condition, only a loss condition, and the goal of the activity is to stave off the loss for as long as possible. Technically, what I should be discussing here is not "winning", but pursuit of the lusory goal, in its various shades and forms. However, I will use the term "winning" loosely, from here on out, to refer to the larger notion of the pursuits of lusory goals, and use the terms "achieving a victory" and "winning proper" to refer to the narrower notion. I do not use the term "success" because I think its natural use is ambiguous between win-related concepts, and our larger purposes for playing a game. My spouse will say that the playing of a party game was "successful" if it was fun for all involved, regardless of whether she did well by the internal standard of the game.

that *striving play*. In striving play, goal and purpose are skew. An achievement player plays to win. A striving player acquires, temporarily, an interest in winning for the sake of the struggle. Thus, striving play involves a motivational inversion from ordinary life. In ordinary practical life, we pursue the means for the sake of the ends. But in striving play, we pursue the ends for the sake of the means. We take up a goal for the sake of the activity of struggling for it.

This motivational inversion is, in my eyes, the most interesting possibility raised by the Suitsian analysis. I will largely focus my analysis on striving play, not because I think it is the superior form of play, but because I think it is the more convoluted, more fascinating, and most frequently misunderstood form of play. Thinking about striving play will teach us something remarkable about ourselves, as rational agents that are capable of inducing such motivational inversions.

But first, let's take a step back. Does striving play really exist? I think it is quite commonplace, in fact. For example: my spouse and I once took up racquetball in order to keep fit in a moderately entertaining way. When we play racquetball, I try to win with all my might. And my *trying* to win — my actually *caring* about winning, during the course of the game — is quite useful. Wanting to win helps my fitness by getting me to try harder during the game; it also helps the process be engaging and compelling. In order to obtain those benefits, I need to induce in myself an interest in winning. But that interest is only temporary, and disconnected from my larger and more enduring ends.

We can see how disconnected and short-term that interest is, by looking at how I strategically manipulate my ability to win in the long-term. Suppose somebody offered me free racquetball lessons. These lessons would cause me to jump far ahead of my spouse in

skill. If I was an achievement player, I should certainly take them. But, as a matter of fact, I wouldn't actually take those lessons. If either my spouse or myself pulled substantially ahead of the other in skill, the game would turn quite unpleasant for the both of us. Our matches would lose their interest and spark. We'd probably end up giving up racquetball altogether. In other words: in my long-term life, I make strategic decisions that keep my skill in check and prevent me from winning too many games. I manipulate my capacity to win, with an eye towards maintaining a desirable sort of struggle. But during the game itself, I play all-out to win. If my decision to forego those lessons is comprehensible, then striving play is a real motivational possibility.

Consider, also, 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 fun part is when you fail. There are a great many stupid games, including many drinking games and party games. Take 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. My own favorite stupid game is Bag On Your Head, a ludicrous party game where everybody puts a brown paper grocery bag on their head. The goal of the game is to try to take off the bags on other people's heads. When somebody takes the bag off your head, you're out, and you have to go to the side of the room and leave play. The game, of course, involves lots of stumbling and tripping and flailing around by people with bags on their heads. And the best vantage point to watch all this for the losers, watching from the side. And, at some point, there will be only one person stumbling blindly around the room with a still bag on their head, fumbling around for the other non-existent opponents, while everybody else gets to watch, desperately trying not to laugh. That last person is the winner, and the very best part of the

game is seeing how long it takes them to figure out that they have, in fact, won.

The children's game of Telephone is also a stupid game. You may remember the game from your childhood. To play, everybody sits in a circle. The starting player thinks of a message and then whispers it to the person next to them. The players pass the message on, each whispering to the next, until the message makes its way all around the circle. Then the players compare the original version with the circulated version. The circulated version is, inevitably, wildly distorted, much to everybody's amusement. We play the game because it's funny, and the funny part is failing, but it's only funny if our attempts to communicate really were failures. And that failure is real only if the players really did earnestly try to communicate clearly. Imagine if we played Telephone, but we intentionally tried to distort the message. There would be no actual failure, and thus no hilarity. In *Twister* and Telephone, to have the desired experience — a funny failure — the players must pursue success. But success isn't the point. Stupid games cannot be properly played by achievement players, but only by striving players. Stupid games make sense only if striving play is possible.

And if striving play is possible, it must also be that we have a further capacity. We must be able to *submerge* ourselves in the temporary agency of the game. In order to engage in striving play, I must be able to take on a *disposable end*. That is, I must be able to bring myself to temporarily care about an end, and for that end to appear to me *as final*. But I also must be able to dispose of that end afterwards. Why must submersion in a temporary agency be possible? Why must we be able to take on disposable ends?

Imagine what it would be like if we could not submerge ourselves in this way. Imagine a striving player who could only pursue game ends in the normal, transparently instrumental

fashion — who could not submerge themselves in an alternate agency. Their purpose in play is having a struggle, and that purpose is perpetually before their minds and active in their reasoning. This striving player, then, couldn't really pursue the game-end wholeheartedly. If we were always constantly aware of, and fully motivated by, our broader purpose in striving play, then our struggles to achieve victory would be curiously undercut. In any game without a time-limit, if victory were in our grasp, it would be entirely reasonable to delay the victory in order to have more of the activity of striving.⁶ But this would be very odd behavior, and would defeat much of the point of striving play.

A friend of mine relates the following story: his ten-year old son was beating my friend badly at *Monopoly*. The son was very much enjoying the experience. My friend discovered that every time he was about to lose, his son would sneak him some extra cash just to keep the game going. The son just wanted to extend the experience, to keep on beating his father forever. The story is funny precisely because the son is missing something crucial about how game playing works. In order to be absorbed in a game, we must behave as if winning were a final end. That end must phenomenally engulf us, if we are to be gripped by the game and if its thrills and threats are to have emotional punch for us. We must pursue the goals of the game wholeheartedly, putting our larger purpose out of mind. In other words, we must submerge ourselves in a temporary agency.

Aesthetic experiences of one's own activity

Stupid games are not the point of our inquiry; they are merely a blunt example to show

⁶ This excellent point was originally raised to me by Christopher Yorke.

the possibility of striving play. I'm interested in showing that games can be an art form. So let's start by thinking about how games can support aesthetic experiences. (I do not mean to imply that aim of art is exclusively to provide aesthetic experiences, but only that it is one of the characteristic functions of art to do so.) The recent discussion of game aesthetics has largely focused on thinking about games as a form of fiction (Tavinor 2017, 2009; Robson and Meskin 2016). What we lack is an aesthetics of Suitsian play.

So: consider the category of *aesthetic striving play* — that is, game play engaged in for the sake of the aesthetic quality of the struggle. Can striving really give rise to aesthetic qualities, and what would those be like? Let's start with some paradigmatically aesthetic qualities: those of gracefulness and elegance. We obviously attribute such aesthetic qualities to particular playings of games, especially from the spectators' perspective. Sports spectatorship, for example, is full of talk of the beauty and elegance of athletic motion. But the spectator's perspective is not the end of the story. There are distinctive aesthetic qualities available primarily to the causally active game player. These are aesthetic qualities of acting, deciding, and solving.

And those aesthetic qualities can arise, not just for our actions in isolation, but for our actions as practically functional. Some actions are beautiful because of what they get done. Consider the difference between two superficially similar activities: dancing freely and rock climbing. Dancing freely — as I do by myself with my headphones on — can be an aesthetic experience. My own movements can feel to me expressive, dramatic, and, once in a rare while, even a bit graceful. I also rock climb, and rock climbing is full of aesthetic experiences. Climbers praise particular climbs for having interesting movement or beautiful flow. But, unlike many traditional forms of dance, climbing aims at overcoming

obstacles. The climbing experiences that linger most potently in my mind are experiences of movement *as the solution to a problem*— of my deliberateness and gracefulness which got me through a delicate sequence of holds (Nguyen 2017a). 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.

Take another paradigmatically aesthetic property: harmony. When a chess player discovers a move that elegantly escapes a trap, the harmony of the move — the lovely fit between the challenge and the solution — is available both to themselves and to outsiders. But something more is available especially to the player: a special experience of harmony between their abilities and the challenges of the world. When your abilities are pushed to their maximum, when your mind or body is just barely able to do what's required, when your abilities are just barely enough to cope with the situation at hand — that is an experience of harmony available primarily to the player themselves. It is a harmony between self and challenge, between the practical self and the obstacles of its world. It is a harmony of practical fit between your whole self and the world.

This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatic aesthetic experience of playing games. Once we've seen it, we can see that aesthetic experiences with this character exist outside of games. I value philosophy because I value truth, but I also savor the feel of that beautiful moment of epiphany, when I finally find that argument that I was groping for. Games can provide consciously sculpted versions of those everyday experiences. There is a natural aesthetic pleasure to working through a difficult math proof; chess seems designed, at least in part, to concentrate and refine that pleasure for its own sake. In ordinary practical life, we catch momentary glimpses, when we are lucky, of harmony between our abilities and

our tasks. But often, there is no such harmony. Our abilities fall far short of the tasks, or the tasks are horribly dull but we must put nose to grindstone and grade these papers anyway.

But we can design games for the sake of this harmony of practical fit. In our games, the obstacles are designed to be solved by the human mind and the human body— unlike, say, the tasks of curing cancer or grading. John Dewey suggested that many of the arts are crystallizations of ordinary human experience (Dewey 2005). Fiction is the crystallization of telling people about what happened, visual arts are the crystallization of looking around and seeing, music is the crystallization of listening. Games, I claim, are the crystallization of practicality. Aesthetic experience of action are natural and occur outside of games all the time. Fixing a broken car engine, figuring out a math proof, managing a corporation, even getting into a bar fight — each can have its own particular interest and beauty. These include the satisfaction of finding the elegant solution to an administrative problem, of dodging perfectly around an unexpected obstacle. These experiences are wonderful — but in the wild, they are far too rare. Games can concentrate those experiences. When we design games, we can sculpt the shape of the activity to make beautiful action more likely. And games can intensify and refine those aesthetic qualities, just as a painting can intensify and refine the aesthetic qualities we find in the natural sights and sounds of the world.

Aesthetic striving games, then, are games designed primarily for the purpose of providing aesthetic experiences of practicality to their players. Notice that the categories of aesthetic striving games and aesthetic striving players do not quite always align. A game could have been originally designed to promote achievement, but certain players might take it up for aesthetic striving. An achievement player could take up an aesthetic striving game simply because they wanted to win, but be lead by the game's design into having

aesthetic experiences along the way. But, in most cases, aesthetic striving games seem made for aesthetic striving players.

Let's return to *Sign*. *Sign* is distinctive in several ways. In many other role-playing games, such as *Fiasco*, the relationship of player to character is theatrical. The player may choose to have their character act counterproductively — against that character's goals — because it would be narratively meaningful. In such a game, I might act out how out my character, a sad-sack con man, unwisely confesses his crimes to a pretty stranger in a bar. It is an idiotic choice for my character, and works against all his goals, but I made the choice because I thought it would make for a satisfying narrative arc. *Sign*, on the other hand, is a striving game. The player must take up the goal of communicating their inner truth, pursuing it wholeheartedly in order to have the desired experience. But the players themselves aren't really interested in winning, in any enduring sense. Their larger purpose is to experience the precise texture of struggling, flailing, and barely managing to communicate. But one will only be gripped by these experiences if one genuinely tries to win during the game.

The fact that *Sign* is an aesthetic striving game is particularly clear to me now that I have added my own house rule. I have decreed that, at the end of the game, nobody will explain what their inner truth was, nor will they say what they thought anybody else's truth was. Nobody ever gets to find out if, in fact, we have successfully communicated each other, even though we pursued that goal during the game. My players and I all agree that this house-rule improves the strange potency of the game, and that it is very much in the spirit of the thing. This house-rule would be absurd if we actually cared about winning in any enduring way. But it is perfectly comprehensible if winning were only a temporarily

adopted interest, taken up for the aesthetic qualities of the pursuit.

The artistic medium of games

So how do game designers fashion these aesthetically rich struggles? It will be useful here to think in terms of the *artistic medium* of games. Let's follow Joseph Margolis's suggestion and distinguish between a physical medium and an artistic medium (Margolis 1980, 42-1)(via (Davies 2003, 183)). Or, as Dominic Lopes puts it, an artistic medium is not merely a certain set of material, but a set of "technical resources" (Lopes 2014, 133-9). For example, in paintings, the physical medium consists of pigments applied to a surface, while the artistic medium includes various techniques, including brushstrokes.

So: is there some sort of artistic medium in common to all aesthetic striving games? What is the medium of games? First, the medium, whatever it is, must be quite abstract, if it is to cover the wide variety of Suitsian games — which includes video games, board games, role playing games, card games, sports, and party games. The medium couldn't be something like, say, software, interactive video, or boards and pieces.⁷

First, it is tempting to say that medium of games is constraints and obstacles. Certainly, that's part of the story, but it doesn't capture the full richness of the game designer's efforts. That view might seem plausibly, if we focused narrowly on only physical games, like traditional sports. Traditional sports are played in the physical world with our actual physical bodies. Thus, the rules of a sport usually start with our physical bodies, with our

⁷ 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 discussion of ideas as the medium of conceptual art (Schellekens 2007).

full range of abilities, and then selectively restricts our use of those abilities. For example, we might disallow the use of hands in soccer, or the use of punching and kicking in basketball. But game designers actually create new sorts of actions and possibilities all the time.⁸ 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 to create passageways. But we need not focus solely on such radically new abilities. Most games create new actions. “Taking a piece” in chess and “a home run” in baseball are new actions that arise only within the context of a particular rule set.

In that case, we might be tempted to say, instead, that the artistic medium of games is rules. And perhaps this is right, if we had a sufficiently loose notion of “rule”. But under most standard uses of the term, this proposal doesn’t work either. Say that you mean by “rule” an explicit, stated principle for action that was mentally upheld by the players. First, as many computer game scholars have pointed out, much of what computer game designers are doing is designing the virtual environment through software manipulations. The software environment is not a set of rules consciously held by a player; it has some independent existence (Leino 2012). Of course, you might think that the software code itself was a set of rules, just rules that ran on a computer rather than on a human brain. But even so, there’s more to game design than rules. The case is clearest with physical games. Think, for example, about obstacle courses and artificial rock climbs. What fills out the experience is the physical details of the material object, and how that particular physicality interacts with the specified rules and the goals of the game. The physicality of games extends even to video games. A rule might tell you to use a particular game console

⁸ (Cardona-Rivera and Young 2013) offers a useful survey of work on game *affordances*.

controller, but the physicality of the controller itself partially conditions the gaming experience.⁹ The video game *PewPewPewPewPewPewPewPewPewPew* illustrates this quite nicely. In the game, two people together control a single 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 that were played with buttons instead. And, even when played with microphones, so much depends on the physical details — the sensitivity of the microphones, the acoustics of the room. These aren’t just rules — these are environmental features. What unites software environments and physical environments is their relationship to challenge. We might say, then, that part of the medium is the *practical environment* — the environment conceived of in its opposition to our goals and abilities.

This points us towards the last key element of game design — the goal. Reiner Knizia, elder statesman of German board game design, has said that the central tool in his game design arsenal is the scoring system. The scoring system creates the motivation, says Knizia (Chalkey 2008). The scoring system tells you whether you need to collaborate or compete with the other players. And the scoring system helps create how that interactions goes. The goals, combined with the game’s mechanics, tells us whether we are to manipulate our opponents or bargain with them, whether we are to cleverly profit off their actions or simply attack them. A game’s goals tell us what to care about during the game. When we play a game, we simply take on the goals it indicates, and acquire the motivations that the

⁹ For a study of the aesthetics of our physical interaction with video game controllers, see (Kirkpatrick 2011, 87-116).

game wishes us to acquire.

Think about a board game night between friends. We sit down to the game table and pull out a new board game that has just arrived in the mail, taking off the shrink wrap. We pop out the cardboard tokens in a great heap on the table and begin to sort them into neat piles of green tokens, blue tokens, and gold tokens. We don't know what these tokens are; the physical tokens themselves have no particular importance. If, for instance, my dog ate all the blue tokens, we could replace them with pennies and still be able to play the game. Now we open the rule-book, which tells us that the gold tokens are money, and are useful for buying various resources during the game but don't count towards victory at the end. The winner will be the person who has collected the most green tokens. Notice that, before the game starts, we have no interest in collecting green tokens. But during the game, we acquire a hearty interest in the green tokens, to the point where an insufficiency of tokens may inspire armpit sweats, jitters, and a surge of adrenaline at the prospect of a last-ditch plan to get more. 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 Ziplock.

What the Suitsian analysis suggests is that 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, and *those* as the permitted abilities, and *that* as the landscape of obstacles. The designer creates, not only the world in which the player will act, but the skeleton of their practical agency within that world. The designer designates the player's abilities and goals in the game. The designer's control over the form of the player's agency is part of how the game designer sculpts the game's activity. Games can offer us more finely tuned practical

harmonies because the designers have control over both world and agent.

We now have an answer to the question of artistic medium. The common artistic medium of aesthetic striving games — the technical resources by which the game designer sculpts practical experience — are the goals, the rules, and the environment which these various parts animate into a system of constraints. The game designer crafts for their players a very particular form of struggle, and does so by crafting both a temporary practical agency for us to inhabit and a practical environment for us to struggle against. In other words, the medium of the game designer is agency. If you want a slogan, try this one: games are the art of agency.

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. Much of this change is due to challenges regarding the possible existence of group agents and collective agents, like companies and corporations, and other edge cases, including animal agency, robot agency, and the agency of algorithms (Barandiaran, Di Paolo and Rohde 2009; List and Pettit 2011; Gilbert 2013). When I speak of agency, I will generally be thinking in terms of a fairly traditional conception — where agency involves intentional action, or action for a reason. I am in no way presuming that this is a complete account of agency. I don't think we need a full definition or metaphysical account of 'paper' to usefully say that origami uses the medium of paper folding, 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. In fact, I think that investigating how games work in the medium of agency will actually teach us something about the nature of our agency.

But this basic idea — that games work in the medium of agency — reveals something

quite profound about the role games can play in human life, especially our social lives. Games turn out to be a way of *writing down* forms of agency, of inscribing them in an artifact. Games function are among our techniques for inscribing and recording bits of human experience. We have developed methods for recording stories: novels, poetry, film, and other kinds of narrative. We have developed methods for capturing sights: drawing, painting, photography and film. We have developed methods for capturing sounds: written music, recording technologies, and wooden duck calls. We have even developed methods for capturing sequences of action to be performed — cookbook directions, dance choreography, and stage directions. Games are a method for capturing forms of agency. And these techniques and technologies enable all sorts of interactions and modifications. Once we can write something down, that enables us to more easily study and refine it.

And this suggests another possibility: that games can be a way that we *collaborate* in the project of developing our agency and autonomy. If games can record and transmit forms of agency, then I can learn new modes of agency from a game. And you may write down a useful form of agency and pass it to me, through a game. This may, in the abstract, seem slightly insane. But I think it is, in fact, quite plausible, especially when we think of what we actually learn from games. I am not alone in thinking that I acquired a certain focused, logical, and tactical mindset from chess. Rock climbing taught me to focus precisely on my balance and precisions of motion. *Tetris* gave me the mental state required to pack my trunk optimally for a trip. My suggestion here is more than that familiar old saw, that games teach us skills and develop our abilities. My claim is that games can teach us the agential mindsets behind those skills — the pairings of a particular kind of interest, with a focus on a particular set of abilities. And the practice of striving play itself teaches us how to be

flexible with our agency — how to pick up and set aside interests for a moment. That flexibility is of great use outside of game. We use our agential flexibility when when switch between our various roles, such as parent, professional, and friend, and adopt the different frames of mind that go with such roles.

As it turns out, the development of our agency and autonomy is not a solitary project. As with many of our other aspects — our scientific understanding, our logical capacities, our morality — we can help each other in the project of personal self-development, and we often do so, not just in person, but through artifactual vessels. And games are an artifactual vessel with which we can communicate modes of agency. The games that we have made constitute a library of agency, in which we have recorded a vast variety of different forms of agencies, and which we can use to explore different ways of being an agent. And it is our capacity to submerge ourselves in alternate agencies that makes it possible for us to use this library.

Games and artificiality

But games also offer one more promise. They can function as a refuge from the inhospitality of ordinary life. In practical life, the world is mostly fixed and our values relatively inflexible. Most of us cannot help but desire company, food, success. The recalcitrant world and our inflexible values generate certain obstacles. These are not the obstacles we wanted to struggle against, but they are the ones we must overcome, in order to get what we want. So we must try to sculpt ourselves and our abilities to fit the needs of the world. The world tells us we must eat, so we must find a job and pretend to ourselves

that we enjoy it. The world tells us that we must find romantic partners, so we learn to be witty, or at least to make to make a decent online dating profile. The world tells us that, if we wish to be professional philosophers, we must grade an endless sea of student papers, no matter how mind-numbing we find the task. So we put nose to grindstone and force our way through.

In games, on the other hand, we sculpt for ourselves exactly the kind of practical activity which we wish to engage in. We pick the goals, ability, and a world. In games, our abilities can precisely suit the challenges we are presented with. In *Super Mario Brothers*, we are given the ability to run and jump, and a world full of chasms to jump over and monsters to jump upon. What's more, our jumping abilities and speed in *Super Mario Brothers* are just barely enough to cope with the chasms and monsters we face. The chess knight's strange leaping movement is just what we need to break through our opponent's defenses. In games, we are given not only the right kind of abilities, but just barely enough of them — which creates drama and interest. And not only do the abilities fit, but their exercise is often pleasurable and interesting and exciting, at least when we've found the right game for our tastes.

How unlike our own dreary world this is! Our abilities sometimes fit our goals in the world, but so often they do not. We want to invent a cure for cancer, but lack the capacities to do it. We wish to help these students learn to write better, but the process is boring and mind-numbing and provokes occasional thoughts of suicide — or at least throwing it all in and becoming a lawyer instead. We do not fit this world comfortably. The obstacles in our path are often intractable, exhausting, or miserable. Games can be an existential balm for our practical unease with the world. In games, the problems can be right-sized for our

capacities, our in-game selves can be right-sized for the problems, and the arrangement of self and world can make solving the problems pleasurable, satisfying, interesting, and beautiful.

Even with our opponents, there is a harmony. In a good game, our opponent's attempts to harm us may, in the right circumstances, actually be channeled so as to create experiences we value. In ordinary life, social attacks and financial attacks are usually painful and unpleasant. They are to be survived and gotten over, but rarely can they be enjoyed. But games are often designed such that your attacks on me are channeled into interesting obstacles for me to overcome. Even our motivations can be curiously harmonized, even if we are at each other's throats. Outside of games, much of the pain and difficulty of social life with others arises from the dizzying plurality of values. Each of us cares about different things; trying to mesh the plurality of disparate values into livable communities is incredibly difficult.

In games, values are usually singular and shared. In games, each person is a simplified agent. And in most cases, competing agents are pursuing the same goal. When we are playing tennis, I do not have to cope with subtle differences between your and my view of the good. You and I are after exactly the same thing: points and victory. It is not that we are cooperating, exactly — but we are motivationally coherent to one another. In some sense, the motivational world described by traditional economics — one in which identically motivated rational actors compete with one another — is false of the actual world, but true of game worlds. When games work, they can sometimes present us with the world as we wish it would have been. The worlds of games are harmonious and interesting worlds, where even our worst impulses are transformed into the pleasure of others. In ordinary life,

we must build practical activities and relationships from gears that were never made to fit. But in games, we can machine all the gears to fit from the start.

And this, I suspect, is both the great promise and the great threat of games. Games can offer us a clarifying balm against the vast, complicated, ever-shifting social world of pluralistic values; and an existential balm against our internal sense that our values are slippery and unclear. In games, values are clear, well-delineated, and typically uniform between all agents. But this also creates a significant moral danger from games — not just from graphically violent games, but from all games. This is the danger of exporting to back to the world a false expectation: that values are should be clear, well-delineated, and uniform in all circumstances. Games threaten us with a fantasy of moral clarity.

The positive part of my view might seem rather familiar. Jane McGonigal makes a similar point in her argument for making our lives more game-like. The world wasn't made to fit us, she says, but games can be made to fit. Playing games is far more pleasurable; our motivations in games are more potent. Thus, concludes, McGonigal we should try to make life more like a game, by gamifying our work, our chores, and our education. We should fill our life with leaderboards, rankings, and badges, and fill our work with carefully engineered gamified systems, in order to make our work and educational lives more pleasant (McGonigal 2011).

But this mistakes how peculiar game values are. We can tailor our struggles in games precisely because our game ends are disposable. But when we try to make the rest of life like a game, we will need to adapt our enduring ends to make the struggle more pleasurable and satisfying. But when we do that — when we instrumentalize our enduring ends as if our life were a game — we court disaster. When we gamify our ordinary life, we will be

tempted to shift and simplify our ends for the sake of the struggle — but then we will no longer aiming at the same target. Games can be safely tailored precisely because they are games.

Games involve taking on temporary ends and submerging ourselves in alternate agencies. And, like any other form of art, exactly the features that make games potentially valuable, also make them potentially dangerous. Games are the art form of agency, and it is in their use of agency where we will find both a great promise and a significant threat.

I have sketched in this chapter the broad strokes of my view. The rest of the book will explore, in greater detail, many of these arguments and possibilities.

In Part I, I'll focus on the motivational structure of game-play. First, in Chapter 2, I'll defend the possibility of striving play against skeptics. In Chapter 3, I'll explore our capacity for submerging ourselves in alternate agencies, and our ability to forget our enduring ends for the span of the game. And I draw lessons for philosophical agency and practical reasoning from the fact that we can play games. Together, these two chapters are the heart of my theoretical account of the motivational structure of game play. They are the core of my philosophical account of the distinctiveness of game play. They are the philosophically densest chapters, but also the heart of the story.

In Chapter 4, I'll argue that games can play a special role in our development of our own agency and autonomy. Games can communicate modes of agency. And, when we play games, we can learn new modes of agency. Games can constitute a *library of agencies*, and we can use that library to grow.

In Part II, I'll focus on games as an art form. First, in Chapter 5, I'll explore the aesthetics of agency. Beauty is not just confined to sunsets and symphonies; our own actions, choices, and decisions can also have their own kind of beauty. I'll also defend the aesthetics of agency against the worries that aesthetic experience is essentially incompatible with practical and instrumental states of mind.

In Chapter 6, I'll argue that games are significantly like traditional art works in some very important ways. Most importantly, games involve socially-maintained prescriptions for attention — they are a way of framing certain parts of the world for our appreciation. Games are a way of aesthetically framing our own practical activity.

In Chapter 7, I'll look at how games are distinctive as an art form. Unlike most traditional arts, the aesthetic qualities of a game arise, not in the artifact itself, but in the activity of the player. Thus, the aesthetic qualities of games are significantly distanced from the designer and the game itself. Thus, the game designer must cope with a distinctive artistic difficulty: they must achieve their aesthetic effects through the agency of the player.

In Part III, I'll focus the social and moral consequences of the agential manipulations of games. First, in Chapter 8, I'll argue that games not only work in the medium of agency, but also in the medium of sociality. Games arrange social relationships and create social patterns through their use of the agential medium. And in doing so, they can achieve some very remarkable effects, like transforming competition into cooperation.

In Chapter 9, I'll worry about a distinctive danger of the agential medium. Games might threaten our autonomy if we do not properly manage the transition back to non-game life. Games may foster the expectation that values be clear, simple, and easily stated — that our goals be obvious and measurable. Games may present a fantasy of moral clarity. And in

Chapter 10, I'll argue that aesthetic striving play might offer us some protection against the fantasy of moral clarity.

One last word of warning: my discussion will involve a fairly large number of in-depth case studies of particular games — far more than one might usually find in a work of academic philosophy, even one in aesthetics. This is due, in part, to the relative novelty of trying to present a unified account of the art form across a broad variety of games. My account will include computer games, team sports, solo sports, board games, card games, party games, tabletop role playing games, and live action role-playing games. Much of the recent discussion of games as an art form has focused fairly narrowly on a very small set of games: computer games, and mostly single-player computer games, often with a strong narrative component. I wish to broaden the focus. Unfortunately, there is no established canon of games that I can depend on the reader to be familiar with. My case for depends on the reader's seeing the extraordinary variety of ways that games make use of the medium of agency. So, if you'll bear with me, I think it very important to describe, in loving detail, a fair number of games. And I hope that the reader, if sufficiently interested, will also seek out and play some of these games. I have played all of the games I mention and have chosen to discuss what I think are exemplars of game design, with a few exceptions as noted. My hope is to develop, through both argument and examples, a compelling picture of games as a very special type of human artifact and as a unique art form.