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 a game can seem so utterly arbitrary. Chess players burn intellectual energy, not on curing cancer or solving the energy crisis, but on trying to beat each other at an artificial and unnecessary activity. When I obsessively played the computer game *Civilization*, I spent enormous efforts towards organizing, micro-managing, and strategizing. I spent that energy, not towards improving my family finances or my department's administrative needs, but on achieving victory in a virtual world. Why not spend that time doing something worthwhile, like advancing science, or at least reading a book?

But what can seem, to some eyes, like the emptiness at the heart of games is actually their greatest strength. A game tells us to take up a particular goal and it designates a set of abilities for us to use in pursuing that goal. It packages that all up with a set of obstacles, custom-made to fit those goals and abilities. When we play a game, those designed goals, abilities, and obstacles plunge us into a focused experience of our own practicality. When I play chess, I become utterly devoted to geometric calculations, to careful logical look-ahead. When I rock climb, I become utterly devoted to using my balance, my strength, my gracefulness and physical ingenuity. When I play *Super Mario Brothers*, I focus entirely on

using my reflexes and my avatar's jumping capacities to bound over enemies and chasms. Game designers don't just focus us; they *sculpt* the form of activity. Goals, ability, and environment: these are the means by which the game designer practices their art.

The goals of a game, then, aren't actually arbitrary at all. They only seem arbitrary because we were looking in the wrong direction. Often, we try to justify the goals of a game by looking at the goals themselves, or by looking forwards, to what follows from those goals. But when we look in these places, we often come up empty. Often, the best justification for the goals of the game will come by looking *backwards*, to the activity those goals structure. Playing games, then, often reverses the direction of justification from ordinary life. In ordinary practical life, we take the means for the sake of the ends. But in games, we often take up the ends for the sake of the means. We pursue a goal for the sake of the pursuit itself, and the only justification that goal will come terms of the pursuit that it structures — from how good or interesting or satisfying that struggle turns out to be. Playing games can be a *motivational inversion* of ordinary life.

This is not the sake with all game play. Game playing is far too complex a phenomenon to be captured in any one neat formulation. There are a great variety of reasons for playing games. Some game-playing is motivationally straightforward. Playing poker for money or competing in the Olympics for the glory of the win — in those types of play, winning is important for its own sake, or for the sake of what follows from it. These are very familiar lines off justification. But some game-playing is motivationally flipped from the norm. When I settle down to an evening of board gaming with my family and friends, I don't really care about winning. I take on a temporary interest in winning for the sake of having a struggle. I might be in it for fun, or for relaxation. I might be interested in developing my skills, or in

love with the beauty of tactical calculations. When I play in this way, my interest in winning is something strangely temporary, which I inhabit just so I can play the game.

Seeing this motivational structure will also help us to understand what games are, in their bones. I'm not talking about all games here, necessarily — perhaps games of pure make-believe or narrative invention should be treated separately. But this analysis helps us to understand games of struggle, where we aim at a goal and absorb ourselves in the instrumental details of its pursuit. It will help us to understand many video games, sports, card games, board games, and role-playing games. When games tell us what goals to take and what abilities to take on, they are specifying *a form of agency*. When we play these games, we take on, for a little while, an alternate form of agency; we give ourselves over to another way of inhabiting our own agency.

Thinking about games, and the fact that we can play them, will teach us some important things about ourselves and our practices. First, we will learn that we have a remarkable capacity for fluidity with our own agency. We can set up temporary agencies within our primary agency; we can submerge ourselves inside these temporary agencies, let them dominate our awareness, our decisions, and our actions — and then, when the game ends, we can simply let those agencies evaporate from our consciousness.

Second, we will learn that the games are inextricably entangled with our capacity for agential fluidity. Games specify forms of agency by designating certain goals and abilities. Games, it turns out, 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. They are a way of communicating forms of agency. Games, then, take their place in the list of human practices of inscription. Painting lets us record sights, stories lets us record

narrative, and games let us record agencies. The fact that we communicate agencies in this way is useful for all manner of projects. For one: that communication is a way in which we can help each other develop our autonomy. Games let us experience forms of agency we might not have discovered on our own. They help us develop each other's agency and autonomy collaboratively.

Third, we will learn that games can be a unique form of art. They can use these agential manipulations for artistic ends. Games are particularly good at sculpting the player's aesthetic experience of their own agency. Games can set the stage for a player to experience the grace and brilliance of their own actions.

Consider what is, to my mind, a leading candidate for artful game design: *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 *Sign*, the players each take up the role of one of those children. The game assigns each player a backstory and an inner truth that they deeply need 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 the signs which the players invent during the game. There are three rounds. In each round, every player invents a single sign and teaches it to the others; 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; they must absorb themselves in the difficult practical details of communicating inside the severe restrictions of the game.

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 — for a little while, at least. 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. In order to achieve that cherished state of absorbed play, we do it. And the fact that the game designer gets to specify goals and abilities for the player to take on, is precisely what makes games a distinctive art form.[1] Games are the art of agency.

Frameworks and approaches

My interest here is in uncovering the unique potential and the special value of games. There have been, of late, many arguments for the value and importance of games. In many cases, however, the approach of these arguments tends to suppress the unique qualities of

[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.

games.[2] They assimilate games to some other, more familiar category of human artifactual practice. Some have defended games by arguing that they are a member of some more familiar art-form. 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 — they have characters and tell stories. Many video games are also usefully thought of as a new type of cinema. And surely, as Ian Bogost puts it, games can be a kind of procedural rhetoric, making arguments by modeling causal systems in the world. But I worry that these approaches, true as they may be of some games, may, if they grow too dominant, may suppress our appreciation and understanding of games' more unique potential.

Over in the philosophy of sport, the value of games is usually characterized in terms of their ability to promote skills, excellences, and achievements. But notice that this also makes out the value of games in a very familiar way. For example, Tom Hurka argues that games are valuable because they enable difficult achievements. But the possibility of difficult achievements is, obviously, not confined to games. Curing cancer and inventing a better

[2] My argument is aligned, in spirit, with those scholars who call themselves 'ludologists', who argue that games are a unique category. I've offered a general overview of the narratology vs. ludology debate in (Nguyen 2017b). I differ from most ludologists in thinking that certain general notions from the study of artworks can, in fact, be useful. For example: i do not think that games are an entirely distinct category from art, nor do I think that their sole purpose is "fun", or supporting free play. I differ significantly from most other ludologists in the details of my argument; see in particular Chapters 3, 4, and 6 for details.

mousetrap would also be difficult achievements, and they would give us something useful, besides. This leads Hurka to conclude that, in most cases, games are less valuable than their non-game, practical analogues. Science and philosophy are valuable in the same way as games, in offering difficult achievements, but also valuable in another way: they give us at truth and understanding, or at least some useful tools. 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 all better off doing something both difficult and 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 out on something very special to games. Games, I will argue, are a distinctive art form. They offer us access to a unique artistic horizon and to 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 world throws at us, with whatever means we happen to have lying around. The form of our struggle is, in practical life, 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 their designers. In games, designers have carefully arranged goal, ability, and obstacle for the sake of sculpting a struggle. Struggles in games can be carefully shaped in order to be interesting, fun, or even beautiful for the strugglers. 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.

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 immoveable; we value life, freedom, and happiness. Even for our own peculiar personal values, there's typically little flex, especially in the short term. I care about art, creativity, and philosophy. Even if I wanted to change those values of mine and somehow managed to alter the shape of my values, they would change quite slowly. My non-game actions are mostly guided by the these enduring and inflexible values. But game activity is different. In games, our action is guided by explicitly specified ends. We can change our in-game ends easily and fluidly. We can adopt new aims in game, 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, I claim, a significant capacity for agential fluidity, and games make full use of that capacity.

Suits and striving

The best place to start is Bernard Suits's 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 take shortcuts or a taxi. The whole point is to get there under certain limitations. Suits contrasts game playing with what he calls 'technical activity' — that is, the ordinary practice of using efficient means to obtain an independently valuable end. 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, all things considered. 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 inside certain specified inefficiencies. That end is largely valuable only when achieved inside those constraints; it is largely valueless on its own. We can tell precisely because we are willing to set up blockades to that end; because what we care about is achieving that end inside those constraints. By itself, getting a ball through a stupid little basket has no independent value on its own. We take up the goal of making baskets against opposition in order to play basketball. Making baskets is only valuable when it's done inside those constraints. 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 the play money that I command.

We must distinguish here carefully here between the *goals* of a game and our *purpose* in playing that 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. The goal is what our choices are directed towards and what our actions aim to achieve while we are playing the game. Our purpose with a game, on the other hand, is our reason for engaging in that pursuit in the first place. Our purpose in playing a game might be having fun, getting some exercise, de-

stressing, developing our skills, vanquishing our opponents, achieving difficult tasks, or even experiencing the beauty of our own skilled action.

For some game players, goal and purpose can be one and the same. This professional poker player is just in it for the money, this Olympic sprinter just wants to be win, period. Sometimes the goal and purposes are distinct, but the achieving the purpose will follows from achieving the goal in a linear and straightforward way. This Olympic pole vaulter wants to win for the sake of fame and status; this *Starcraft 2* professional just wants the prize money that comes from winning tournaments. They'll get what they want by winning. They genuinely want to win because winning is instrumentally necessary to achieve their true purpose.

What Suits exposes, however, is another possibility: that our goal and purpose in a game can be quite 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 introduce 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 won, but I have certainly failed 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 and types of game playing that do not conform to Suits's theory. Many games seem to involve no real struggle against obstacles at all. This includes children's games of make believe, narratively oriented tabletop roleplaying games like *Fiasco*, and wholly narrative computer games like

The Stanley Parable. I agree with all of these criticisms. I do not think Suits does not provide a complete account of all forms of game playing.[3] But we should not throw away Suit's analysis entirely, just because he failed to provide a complete account of games. Let us adapt Suits's 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. (When I want to talk about all sorts of games, Suitsian and non-Suitsian, I'll talk about 'games in the wide sense'.)

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, for some, 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 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

[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's 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.

worry recurs in the new wave of games scholarship, even among some of games' most ardent defenders. These scholars often argue for the worth and importance of games by pointing out how games can offer us something else besides 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, as worthy examples, 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 cannot do both at once. The game argues that the goals of capitalism and the goals of environmentalism are essentially at odds. The game is worthwhile, according to Bogot's account, because it has such serious and worthwhile content. Along a similar vein, 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, for example, highlights 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 drone bombs 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).

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. Thus, we must find some other footing from which to establish the value of games. Notice that these sorts of accountings pick out a very particular type of game as the 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. Moreover, focusing too heavily on such accounts also tend to sideline those games whose best qualities are in their instrumental challenges. Very few people praise Chess, Bridge, *Starcraft 2*, or *Magic: the Gathering* for the stories they tell or the arguments they make. Those games are beloved precisely for the quality of their instrumental challenges. It is easy to take accountings like Bogost's, Sharp's, and Flanagan's as implying that we ought to look past such instrumental games, in favor of their more representationally serious kin. But I think we ought not dismiss instrumental play so quickly. The dismissal arises, I think, from misunderstanding the richly varied motivational structures that might be 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, distinguished by their motivational structure. One might be playing for the sake of winning — either one wants the win for its own sake or for something that follows from winning, like goods and money.[5] Let's call this *achievement*

[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 the 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.

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, one might be pursuing the win for the sake of the struggle. Let's call 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. What can we learn about ourselves, that we can induce such motivational inversions in ourselves? And what can we learn about our social practices, that game designers have significant control over that inversion?

But first, let's take a step back. Does striving play really exist? I think it does, and that it is, in fact, quite commonplace. 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 me to get that health benefit, by getting me to try harder during the game; it also helps the process be engaging and compelling. So I induce in myself an interest in winning, for the sake of the health benefits of running around after that ball. But that interest is only temporary, and is disconnected from

my larger and more enduring ends. We can tell because of how I strategically manipulate my ability to win in the long-term. Suppose somebody offered me (and only me) free racquetball lessons. These lessons would cause me to jump ahead enormously 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, it would actually be quite unpleasant for the both of us. The games would lose their interest and spark. We'd probably end up giving up racquetball altogether, and there would go the health benefits. 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. But during the game, I play all-out to win. I don't really want to win in the long-term, I only maintain an interest in winning in the short term. If my decision to pass on those lessons is comprehensible, then striving play is a real motivational possibility.

Consider, also, what I'll 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 and then tries to take off the bags on other people's heads while stumbling blindly around the room. When somebody takes the bag off your head, you're out. At some point, there is only one person stumbling blindly around the room with a bag still on their head, while everybody else watches, trying to suppress laughter. That lone 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 probably remember the game from your childhood. To play the game, everybody sits in a circle. The starting player thinks of a message and then whispers it to the person next to them. The circle passes the message on, each whispering to the next, until it makes its way around the circle. The players then reveal the original and the version that went all the way around — which is inevitably wildly distorted. We play the game because it's funny, and the funny part is the failure, but it's only funny if our attempts to communicate really do fail — and that failure is real only if the players really did earnestly try to communicate clearly. Imagine if we played Telephone, but each person intentionally distorted the message. There would be no actual failure, and thus no hilarity. In *Twister* and Telephone, to have the desired experience — a funny failure — one 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 that a striving player could only pursue game-ends in the normal instrumental fashion. That is, imagine when a striving player tried to win the game in order to bring about the activity of striving, their purpose in playing — having a struggle — was perpetually before their minds and active in their reasoning. In other

words, imagine their interest in winning was transparently subservient to the activity of striving. A striving player couldn't then 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 striving 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 is very odd behavior, and defeats 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*, and enjoying the experience of beating his father so much, that every time the father was on the verge of losing, the son would sneak his father some extra cash just to keep the game going. The son just wanted to keep on beating his father down forever. This is, obviously, ridiculous behavior. The story is funny precisely because the son isn't quite fully grasping the practice of game playing. To play a game is to behave, during the game, as if winning were a final end. Those that apparent finality must phenomenally engulf us, if we are to achieve the desirable state of absorption in instrumental play. In order to be gripped by the game, in order for its thrills and threats to have emotional punch for us, we must be able to enter the phenomenal state of holding the game's goals as a something very much like a final end. We must submerge ourselves in a temporary alternate agency. We must largely put out of our minds why we are pursuing the goals of the game, and pursue them wholeheartedly, for a while.

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

Aesthetic experiences of one's own activity

But stupid games are not the point of our inquiry; they are merely a blunt example to support 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, as seen from the stands. 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, from the first-personal perspective. It is not just that a movement or solution can be beautiful; there can be a special beauty in the purposeful origination of that movement and that solution.

And those aesthetic qualities can arise, not just for our actions in the abstract, but for actions as functionally effective. Some actions are beautiful partly because of what they get done. Consider the difference between two superficially similar activities: dancing freely and rock climbing. Dancing freely — as I do, for example, by myself with my headphones on —

can be an aesthetic proprioceptive experience. My movements can feel to me expressive, dramatic, and, once in a rare while, a bit graceful. I also rock climb, and rock climbing is full of aesthetic proprioceptive experiences. Climbers praise particular climbs for having interesting movement or beautiful flow. But, unlike most 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. The economy and precision of a climb is required by the rock; without it, the climber would exhaust themselves and fall, or simply be unable to advance to the next hold (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 perfect 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 one's abilities and the challenges of the world. When one's abilities are pushed to their maximum, when one's mind or body is just barely able to do what's required, when one's abilities are just right to cope with the situation at hand — that is an experience of harmony 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.

This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatically aesthetic experience of striving. 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 glimpses, when we are lucky, of moments when our abilities and the tasks to which we have set ourselves harmonize. 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). (The view is considered rather old-fashioned these days, but it may still yet have a spark of truth.) 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 having an insight to a difficult situation, of finding the elegant solution, of feeling one's body react to motion instinctively, of dodging and weaving and punching at the right moment. These are wonderful experiences in the wild — but can, sadly, be far too rare. Games can concentrate those experiences, sculpting the activity to increase the likelihood of aesthetically valuable

striving. 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 struggling to their players. Notice that the categories of aesthetic striving games and aesthetic striving players do not perfectly line up. 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 the primary audience of aesthetic striving games will usually be 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. That is, the player imagines the narrative arc they wish their character to have and decides the behavior that would best fit that arc. They may choose to have their character act in non-optimal ways, because it would be narratively meaningful. *Sign*, on the other hand, is a striving game. The player must take up the goal of communicating their inner truth and pursue it wholeheartedly, in order to have the desired experience. But the players aren't really interested in winning — their interest is in 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 say what they thought anybody else's truth was. Nobody ever gets to find out if, in fact, they successfully communicated or understood each other, even though they pursued that goal during the

game. My players and I unanimously 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 were playing for the sake of winning, but it is perfectly comprehensible if we are merely temporarily adopting an interest in winning for the sake of 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)(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, such a medium will 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,

[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).

that's part of the story, but it doesn't capture the full richness of the game designer's manipulations. The view that constraints are the medium is most plausible if we focus narrowly on physical games, like sports. Sports are played in the physical world with our actual physical bodies. Thus, the rules of a sport usually start with our physical bodies, as they really are, with all the abilities that come packaged with them, and then selectively restricts our use of those abilities. For example, we might disallowing 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; all sorts of games create new actions. "Taking a piece" in chess and "a home run" in baseball are new kinds of 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 an 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 then, there's more to

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

game design than such 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 controller, but the physicality of the controller itself partially conditions the gaming experience. The video game *PewPewPewPewPewPewPewPewPew* 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 attack people or collaborate with them, or to compete with them, manipulate them, or bargain with them. A game's goals tell you what to care about during the game. And because we have the capacity for motivational fluidity, when we play a game, we simply take on the goals it indicates, and

so acquire the motivations that the 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 the players begin to sort them into neat piles of green tokens, blue tokens, and gold tokens. We don't know what these tokens are; the physical tokens themselves have no particular importance. If, for instance, my dog ran away with the sheet of blue tokens, we could replace them some pennies without significantly impairing our ability to play the game. We open the rule-book, and we are told that the gold tokens are money, which are useful for buying various resources during the game but don't count towards victory at the end. We are told that we are in competition, and 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 a differential in collected tokens at a key moment may inspire armpit sweats, jitters, and a surge of adrenaline at the prospect of a last-ditch plan to steal away another person's pile in a dramatic in-game maneuver. And once the game is finished, we lose our interest in the green tokens entirely, shove all of them into a messy pile and scoop them into a 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 artificial world in which the player will act, but the practical agency of the actor within that world. The designer designates the player's abilities and goals in the game. In

other words, they design the player's in-game agency. Their control over that agency is part of how the game designer sculpts the practical activity of the game. Games can offer us more finely tuned practical harmonies because the designers are designing both a practical world and the temporary practical agents which will inhabit that world.

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 to inhabit, with its own goals and abilities, and the practical environment that agent will come into contact with. In other words, the medium of the game designer is agency. And game designers often do so to create aesthetic experiences of the player's own activity, which arises from that designed 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, and am happy to think that I am addressing only a sub-category — say, that of individual human agency. I don't think we need a full definition or metaphysical

account of ‘paper’ to usefully say that origami uses the medium of 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 ultimately 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 are, among other things, a way of *writing down* forms of agency, of inscribing them in an artifact. They function as analogues to our other techniques for inscribing and recording parts of human experience and human living. We have developed an array of 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, duck calls. We have even developed methods for capturing sequences of action to be performed — cookbook directions, stage directions. 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 help each there develop our agency and autonomy. If games can record and transmit forms of agency, then I can learn new modes of agency from a game. This may, in the abstract, seem slightly insane. But I think it is, in fact, commonplace. I am not alone in thinking that I acquired a certain focused, logical, and tactical mindset from chess. Rock climbing, too, 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 they can teach us the agential mindsets that use 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. And access to a greater number of agency and autonomy, paired with the flexibility to make use of that access, will enhance our agency and help to fill out our autonomy. As it turns out, we do not develop our agency and autonomy alone. As with all our other aspects — our scientific understanding, our logical capacities, our morality — we can help each other develop, 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 thus constitute a library of agency, in which we have recorded a vast variety of agencies, and which we can use to explore so many 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 value generate certain obstacles. They are not the obstacles we choose, 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 tell 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 write passably good online dating profiles. 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, and so we put nose to grindstone and force ourselves through.

In games, on the other hand, we sculpt exactly the kind of practical activity we wish to engage in. We are given goals, ability, and a world — and, through the careful work of the game designers, the abilities we are given often 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, the avatar's jumping abilities and speed in *Super Mario Brothers* are just barely enough to cope with the chasms and monsters they 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 — in order to create 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 us.

How unlike our own dreary world this is! Our abilities sometimes fit our goals in the world, but so often they do not. We desire a cure for cancer, but lack the full capacities to achieve 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. We do not fit this world comfortably. The obstacles in our path are often intractable, exhausting, or miserable. Games, then, can be an existential balm for our practical unease with the real 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 the two can be such that solving the problems is pleasurable, satisfying, interesting, or otherwise aesthetically valuable.

Games can offer us a harmonized practical world. Our abilities fit our goals, which fit the task. 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 create the experiences we value — the struggle to overcome obstacles. Even our motivations can be curiously harmonized, even when we are set 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, and trying to mesh the plurality of disparate values into livable communities is incredibly difficult. We must build practical activities and relationships that we can inhabit peaceably from gears that weren't made to fit. But in games, even in oppositional ones, we can machine all the gears fit from the start. In games, each person is a simplified agent, and all the competing agents are usually pursuing the same type of goal. When we are playing tennis, I do not have to cope with the subtle differences in your and my view of the good, In tennis, you and I are after exactly one and the same thing: points and victory. It is not that we are necessarily cooperating, but we are motivationally coherent to one another. In some sense, the motivational world described by traditional economics — one of identically motivated rational actors — may be false of the real world, but true of game worlds. When games work, they can sometimes present us with the world as we wish it would have been — a harmonious and interesting world, where even our worst impulses are transformed into the pleasure of others.

And this, I suspect, is both the greatest promise and the greatest 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 is also presents the possibility of a significant moral danger from games — not just graphically violent games, but all games. This is the danger of exporting to the world a false expectation: namely that values are actually clear, well-delineated, and uniform in all circumstances. Games, then, threaten us with a fantasy of moral clarity. Games are especially dangerous, I will argue, when we fail to restrict the particular attitudes of game playing to game contexts — when we export, not only the competitiveness, but the expectation for clarity and simplicity of values to the outside world.

The positive part of my view might seem rather familiar. Famously, Jane McGonigal has argued for the pleasurable superiority of game life. The world wasn't made to fit us, she says, but games can be made to fit. But McGonigal then concludes that 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 more pleasant, so that we can be cheerfully productive. But this, I think, mistakes how peculiar game values are, and how much that peculiarity plays into our ability to tailor game struggles to fit. We have this power to tailor in games precisely because our ends in games are disposable. When we try to make the rest of life like a game, we will be tempted to shift our real life ends around 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. To tailor our struggle to fit, we must change our ends for the sake of the quality of our struggle. One of the easiest ways to

do that is to make our ends more clear, simple, and quantifiable. But there is something very wrong with, say, pushing our moral ends around, to improve the quality of our struggling. When we gamify morality, we will be tempted to simplify moral ends for the sake of the joy of our struggle — but then we will no longer aiming at the right target. Games can be safely tailored precisely because they are games, and because we can devote ourselves to merely disposable ends when we play.

I have sketched, in this chapter, the broad strokes of my view. The rest of the book will explore, in greater detail, many of the arguments and possibilities that I've touched on above.

In Part I, I'll focus on the motivational structure of game-play. In Chapter 2, I'll defend, at length, the possibility of striving play. In Chapter 3, I'll explore our capacity for submerging ourselves in alternate agencies, to forget our normal ends for a while. Together, these two chapters are the heart of my theoretical account of the motivational structure of game play. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 represent the core of my philosophical account of the distinctiveness of game play. They try to show we can learn about our own agency and rationality from thinking about games. They are the philosophically densest chapters, but also the heart of the story.

In Chapter 4, I'll use that picture to argue that games can play a special role in our development of our own agency and autonomy. Games can communicate modes of agency, and we can use them to acquire new modes of agency, and better be able to manage and shift between them. Games can constitute a *library of agencies*, and we can use that library to learn and grow.

In Part II, I'll focus on games as an art form. In Chapter 5, I'll explore the aesthetics of agency: the self-reflective experiences we can have towards our own actions. 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 attentional framing certain parts of the world. Games, in fact, 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. The aesthetic qualities of games are significantly more distant from the stable artifact — much more so than with paintings or novels. And 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 games' social and moral consequences. In Chapter 8, I'll think about games as working not just in the medium of agency, but also in the medium of sociality. Games arrange social relationships and create social patterns. 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 games. Games might threaten our autonomy, when certain game-like attitudes leak into the world. In particular, the expectation that values be clear, simple, and easily stated — that our goals be obvious and measurable — may threaten to erode our valuing. Games may present a fantasy of moral clarity. And in Chapter 10, I'll

argue that aesthetic striving play might serve offer some protection against the outward leak of that fantasy of moral clarity.

A 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 earlier discussion of games as an art form has focused fairly narrowly on a very small set of games: largely single-player computer games, often with a strong narrative component. There is no established canon of games that I can depend on the reader to be familiar with, especially with regards to the agential medium. The case that there is such a medium, I think, depends crucially on seeing how it plays out in particular games — in seeing the width and variety of possible uses for the medium. So, if you'll bear with me, I think it very important to describe, in loving detail, a fair number of games. To understand more broadly what games can do with us, to us, and for us, we must look broadly at the extraordinary variety of games, and the ingenuity of game designers. And I hope that the reader, if sufficiently interested, will also seek out and play some of these games. Except where indicated, I have played all of the games I mention and have chosen to discuss what I think are exemplars of game design (except where explicitly noted). My hope is to develop, through both argument and examples, a compelling picture of games as a unique type of human artifact, and as a special art form, and begin to explore the variety of particular ways in which games, as artful manipulations of agency, can be valuable.