

# Philosophy of Games

C. Thi Nguyen

This is a pre-print draft. Please cite the final version, which appeared in *Philosophy Compass* 12 (8), 2017.  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/phc3.12426/full>

An expanded version of this discussion, with some further analysis, appears in *Games: Agency as Art*:  
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/games-9780190052089>

## Abstract

What is a game? What are we doing when we play a game? What is the value of playing games? Several different philosophical subdisciplines have attempted to answer these questions using very distinctive frameworks. Some have approached games as something like a text, deploying theoretical frameworks from the study of narrative, fiction, and rhetoric to interrogate games for their representational content. Others have approached games as artworks and asked questions about the authorship of games, about the ontology of the work and its performance. Yet others, from the philosophy of sport, have focused on normative issues of fairness, rule application, and competition. The primary purpose of this article is to provide an overview of several different philosophical approaches to games and, hopefully, demonstrate the relevance and value of the different approaches to each other. Early academic attempts to cope with games tried to treat games as a subtype of narrative and to interpret games exactly as one might interpret a static, linear narrative. A faction of game studies, self-described as “ludologists,” argued that games were a substantially novel form and could not be treated with traditional tools for narrative analysis. In traditional narrative, an audience is told and interprets the story, where in a game, the player enacts and creates the story. Since that early debate, theorists have attempted to offer more nuanced accounts of how games might achieve similar ends to more traditional texts. For example, games might be seen as a novel type of fiction, which uses interactive techniques to achieve immersion in a fictional world. Alternately, games might be seen as a new way to represent causal systems, and so a new way to criticize social and political entities. Work from contemporary analytic philosophy of art has, on the other hand, asked questions whether games could be artworks and, if so, what kind. Much of this debate has concerned the precise nature of the artwork, and the relationship between the artist and the audience. Some have claimed that the audience is a cocreator of the artwork, and so games are a uniquely unfinished and cooperative art form. Others have claimed that, instead, the audience does not help create the artwork; rather, interacting with the artwork is how an audience member appreciates the artist's finished production. Other streams of work

have focused less on the game as a text or work, and more on game play as a kind of activity. One common view is that game play occurs in a “magic circle.” Inside the magic circle, players take on new roles, follow different rules, and actions have different meanings. Actions inside the magic circle do not have their usual consequences for the rest of life. Enemies of the magic circle view have claimed that the view ignores the deep integration of game life from ordinary life and point to gambling, gold farming, and the status effects of sports. Philosophers of sport, on the other hand, have approached games with an entirely different framework. This has lead into investigations about the normative nature of games—what guides the applications of rules and how those rules might be applied, interpreted, or even changed. Furthermore, they have investigated games as social practices and as forms of life.

The philosophical study of games is presently divided across a number of very different sub-domains, which, at present, rarely interact. The primary purpose of this article is to provide an overview of several different philosophical approaches to games, and hopefully demonstrate their relevance and value to one another.

I will confine myself to central questions of ontology and value. What is a game? What are we doing when we play a game? What is the value of playing games? Several philosophical sub-disciplines have attempted to answer these questions using very distinctive frameworks. Some have approached games as texts, deploying theoretical tools from the study of narrative, fiction, and rhetoric to interrogate games for their representational content. Others have approached games as artworks, and asked questions about authorship and ontology. Yet others, from the philosophy of sport, have focused on normative issues of fairness, rule-application, and competition.

In this article, I will attempt to track these different conversations. I cannot hope to be exhaustive. In particular, I will elide the discussion of ‘play’ in general, and focus only on

those artifacts which we call ‘games’.<sup>1</sup> My primary aim is to survey work inside philosophy itself. Right next door is a new interdisciplinary field called “game studies”, largely focused on computer games. That field includes work from literary theorists, cultural studies, new media scholars, anthropologists, game designers, and some philosophers, and has evolved its own internal structure and canon. That field is massive, and summarizing it is far beyond the scope of this paper; I can only provide a few useful touchstones from game studies that may be particularly useful to philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Nor will I, for reasons of space and expertise, be able to cover the rich discussion within continental philosophy on games and play. I hope here only to convey a sense of what issues emerge from the various focused discussions of particular types of games, and highlight those discussions which have implications for thinking about games in general. I am particularly interested in revealing the very different conceptual frameworks employed by the various sub-disciplines — conceiving of games as, variously, texts to be read, artworks to be appreciated, or activities to be justified. I will suggest some ways in which the various conversations can learn from each other, and point to some potential avenues for synthesis.

### **Foundational work on games**

There are a handful of older foundational texts that influence virtually all modern work on games. Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* is usually considered the foundational work for the modern study of games. Prior to Huizinga, the dominant accounts of play were instrumental — they sought to ground the value of play in terms of certain practical

---

<sup>1</sup> Randolph Feezell’s recent argument for a pluralist conception of play also function as an excellent overview of the adjoining field of the philosophy of play (Feezell 2010).

<sup>2</sup> (Wolf and Perron 2014) is the most recent and exhaustive survey of the game studies field.

benefits, and framed games as useful methods for children's education, or as outlets for aggressive energies. Huizinga, instead, argues that the impulse to play lies outside the usual motives of productiveness, truth-seeking, and moral correctness. Play is the direct opposite of seriousness, and as such, does not concern itself with truth or falsity, good or evil, vice or virtue. Famously, Huizinga characterizes play as voluntarily stepping outside of "real" life into an alternate, temporary sphere of activity which he calls a "magic circle" of play. Inside this magic circle, we take up new roles and new rules for behavior. What happens inside the magic circle does not have the usual consequence outside the magic circle. If I oppose you in the game, you ought not blame me for it once we have resumed normal life. Huizinga suggests that there is an essential unity between games and certain other activities, like religious ritual and theater. In all of them, we enter into a consecrated, dedicated ground, where we suspend everyday activities, take up new roles and motivations, and, at moment's notice, put it all away again (Huizinga 1955).

Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* criticizes Huizinga's unified account of play. Caillois offers, instead, four different basic categories of play: *agon*, the play of competition; *mimesis*, the play of make-believe; *alea*, the play of luck and gambling; and *ilinx*, the play of vertigo and disorientation (think of children spinning and roller coasters). Some of these forms are compatible — for example, competitive play and luck play are both present in a game of poker. Other forms are essentially incompatible: says Caillois, make-believe play is essentially cooperative and thus incompatible with competitive play. Importantly, Caillois distinguishes between the play-impulse and the game-impulse. The play impulse, called *paida*, is the child-like impulse towards free exploration and discovery. *Paida*, Caillois argues, is then refined through the gaming impulse, called *ludus*. *Ludus* is the tendency

towards regulation and measurement. Children gleefully rolling around in the mud, wrestling for the sheer fun of it, is *paida*; adults wrestling according to rules with a judged outcome is *ludus* (Caillois 1961).

In analytic philosophy, the foundational work is Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper*, which attempts to give a rigorous definition of the term 'game' — contra Wittgenstein's claim that 'game' is undefinable. Suits offers the following definition: to play a game is to take up unnecessary obstacles for the sake of the activity they make possible. In basketball, I take on the goals of getting a ball through a small-ish hoop; I take up opponents and a requirement for dribbling. This is not because getting the ball through the hoop is, in and of itself, a valuable achievement. If that were the case, I would just show up to an empty basketball court with a stepladder and have at it. Rather, I adopt an essentially arbitrary goal (achieving such-and-such inside certain constraints) in order to create a new kind of activity. Thus, playing games inverts the usual relationship of means and ends. In practical life, we select means for the sake of an independently valuable end. In game life, on the other hand, we select an arbitrary end for the sake of undergoing some particular means. This leads to Suits' argument that games are the purpose of life. The simple version of the argument: if we imagine utopia, we imagine it free of all problems, so what else would we do with our time but play games? And if games are the sole activity in utopia, then they must be the purpose of life. The formal version of the argument is distinctively Aristotelean. All practical activity that we might call "work" seeks to eliminate itself, says Suits. Medicine, for example, seeks to eliminate disease, which would in turn eliminate the need for the practice of medicine. Even art, Suits suggests, has a practical purpose: soothing the ailments of the heart, which would also be unnecessary in utopia. Game-play, on the

other hand, does not seek to eliminate itself — and so can bear the weight of being the purpose of life (Suits 2005).

I will now turn to the different philosophical approaches to games that have subsequently arisen. One might notice that what follows largely focuses on either computer games or sports as the paradigmatic examples of games. There is precious little philosophical work on board games, card games, or gambling. Much of the work on the aesthetics of games, for example, is focused solely on computer games and concerns itself with features specific to computer games, such as the presence of a virtual world and the in-game avatar. The weight of what follows will reflect the current preoccupations of academic work on games, but is not intended to ratify that preoccupation. Rather, it seems an unevenness in need of redress. I will focus on those issues that might be useful for the study of games, writ large.

### **Computer games as representations**

One significant branch of recent thinking about computer games attempts to do so using various traditions of literary theory, textual analysis, and the analysis of representations — treating computer games as narrative, fiction, or rhetoric. This branch sometimes gestures at games in general, but typically takes examples almost exclusively from computer games. The following debate was largely conducted in the interdisciplinary field which calls itself game studies, though the issues have been taken up in analytic aesthetics.

Janet Murray's *Hamlet in the Holodeck* is usually taken to be the foundational moment in analyzing computer games as narratives. She famously interprets the video-game *Tetris*, in which one desperately attempts to place rapidly falling blocks, as a commentary on the

fast-paced, desperate nature of industrialized, capitalist life (Murray 1997). Another key early treatment is Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, which treats digital games as part of a distinctive new kind of text. Cybertexts are not set sequences of signs; rather, they are cybernetic systems which generate sequences of signs in response to input. Cybertexts, for Aarseth, are part of a broader category, which he dubs "ergodic literature", in which the reader must expend nontrivial effort in traversing the text (Aarseth 1997).

Murray's reading and others like it polarized the game studies community. The debates that followed are now referred to as the "ludology versus narratology" debates — usually referred to with a shudder, a memory of a horrible conflict that has, thank goodness, finally passed. The problem, say the ludologists, is that Murray tried to apply theoretical techniques from narrative studies directly to games without sufficient respect for their uniqueness.

Here are some of the key arguments from early ludology. First, with a narrative, the audience primarily interprets events, whereas with games, the player active configures of events in pursuit of some goal (62-5; Eskelinen 2001). Another way to put it: narratives are representations which contain information; games, on the other hand, are simulations, which respond to input according to rules (Frasca 2003). One key feature is the radically different experience of time between narratives and games. It will help here to distinguish between narratological concepts of 'story' and 'discourse'. A story is the actual chronology of events in a narrative; a discourse is the order that those events emerge in the telling of the narrative. In narratives, there is always a distinction between story and discourse; in games, that distinction collapses (Juul 2001; Eskelinen 2001). The audience of a narrative *is told and interprets* the story, while the player of a game *enacts and creates* a story. Thus, say

the ludologists, the conceptual tools developed for studying narrative will not function well for games; we need to either start afresh, or, at the very least, carefully re-consider and substantially re-engineer the old tools.

The commitments of ludology, then, seem to be: first, that games are a novel kind of entity; second, that a game is to be substantively identified with a set of rules for play; and third, that games are to be understood through the process of play. This is not to say that ludologists necessarily think that games can never have a narrative component. Gonzalo Frasca's view, for example, is that games and narratives are related, though ontologically distinct, entities. A narrative, says Frasca, is a particular sequence of events. A game is a set of rules, which specifies victory and loss conditions. A game, therefore, is a set of possible sequences, rather than any one particular sequence. In other words, a game may produce narratives, but is not itself a narrative (Frasca 1999).

Ludology has many adherents, but many opponents. Some have argued that, though games are not precisely the same as more traditional forms of narrative, they have recognizably similar functions. Thus, they may be usefully be treated as slightly new versions of familiar types, and analyzed with slight modifications to familiar tools.

One such tactic is to pivot from the narrower concept of "narrative" towards the relatively broader concept of "fiction". Grant Tavinor argues, using the weapons of analytic aesthetics, that videogames can be a kind of fiction, using Walton's theory of fiction. In Walton's view, all representative artworks are forms of make-believe play. In all forms of make-believe, we use props as springboards for the imagination. In children's make-believe, we use, say, a broomstick to imagine a horse. In adult fictions, we use words or images to help imagine ourselves into, say, the mental state of a particular character.

Tavinor argues that this is also precisely what's going on in many videogames: the images and sounds of a videogame are props for the imagination. Videogames are fictions because they are "representational artifacts that depict situations with an imagined existence only, and that they rely on our cognitive abilities to imagine such things" (Tavinor 2009, 44). Notice that this avoids the specific problems raised by the ludologists about the narrative conception of games. The ludologists complained that narratives involved a very specific relationship between the sequence of events and its narration. But the Waltonian conception of fiction merely involves imagined situations; there are no requirements for a narrator or even any sequence of events at all. After all, Walton's notion of fiction was intended to cover all sorts of representations, including paintings.

But, says Tavinor, videogames are a new sort of fiction, since they are interactive. A traditional novel has a fixed fictional content, which we respond to imaginatively. Videogames, on the other hand, are fiction machines, which produce fictional content based on user input. Furthermore, videogames permit players to fictionally act within fictional worlds (55). The greatest potential for videogames to contribute to the arts, says Tavinor, is the novel way in which this fictional interactivity can encourage emotional involvement. In videogames, the player produces emotions, which lead to fictional actions in the fictional world — thus their emotions become part of that fictional world. The player's own emotions become props for make-believe; as Tavinor puts it, the player integrates their own emotions into the fiction, and thus becomes more deeply involved (130-42).

Jonathan Robson and Aaron Meskin have offered an even more dramatic claim in the Waltonian vein: that video games are self-involving interactive fictions. That is, video games are part of a special class of fiction in which, by interacting with the game, the player

makes things fictionally true of the player herself, and not just their in-game avatar. For example, if Jane maneuvers her Spiderman avatar to defeat Galactus in a video game, then it is not only fictionally true that Spiderman beat Galactus, it is fictionally true that Jane herself beat Galactus. Robson and Meskin do not claim that their category is an exact match for videogames — pure arcade games like *Tetris* are not fictions in any sense, and wholly non-technological artifacts like Choose Your Own Adventure novels also count as self-involving interactive fictions. Crucially, Robson and Meskin claim that videogames turn out to be philosophically uninteresting as an aesthetic category — there is little of aesthetic relevance connecting *Tetris* and *Grand Theft Auto* — but self-involving interactive fictions turns out to be a very interesting aesthetic category (Robson and Meskin 2016).

Henry Jenkins defends a narrative conception of games more directly. He argues that the ludologists have simply been using too narrow a conception of narrative. Games can present narratives in a different way: spatially. The ludologists's criticism arises from the presumption that narratives have to be temporally rigid structures. But narratives, says Jenkins, are simply bodies of information. Films or books present that information in a fixed sequence. A game designer distributes that information through space, and player discovers it through temporally uncontrolled exploration. Jenkins dubs this form “narrative architecture,” and compares game narrative to the environmental storytelling used by the architects of Disney World, where story elements are infused into particular locations and objects in physical space (Henry 2002).

Another significant movement in game studies has argued for the value of games by treating them as *communications*, which transmit ideas, arguments, and even critiques. Leo Konzak, for example, argues that video games must go beyond mere entertainment — that

video games can gain cultural importance only by expressing and presenting philosophical ideas in game systems (Konzack 2009). Similarly, Mary Flanagan praises certain types of games — variously called activist games, serious games, and critical games — for engaging in political subversion and social criticism (Flanagan 2013). But in what ways might games be especially well-suited to communicate? Ian Bogost has provided an answer in his influential account of games as rhetoric. Games, says Bogost, are exceptionally good tools for representing real-world systems, like economies and political structures. By representing real-world processes at various levels of abstraction, games can not only model, but they can also critique (Bogost 2010). Frasca himself seem to, over time, develop a similar view, in which games are, though not exactly like traditional representations, an extension of that tradition. He argues that games are *simulations* rather than representations, capable of expressing ideas in a more fluid and complex manner. Take for example, a work which attempted to make some claim about the viability of labor unions. Traditional novelists could tell a story about the struggle of labor unions, but they are confined to representing only a single outcome — either the unions succeed or they fail. Imagine, on the other hand, a simulation game, where you tried to guide a labor union to political victory. Such a game could present a whole possibility-space. It could model the complex network of causal interactions and outcomes, demonstrate the various paths to failure and success, and offer a more graded and nuanced representation of the chances for success (Frasca 2003). Bogost further differentiates a simulation from a model. A model, says Bogost, aims at accuracy — the goal of a model is generating true predictions. A simulation, on the other hand, aims at producing understanding — it is a simplified

representation, which seeks to inform a user's understanding of the system it represents (Bogost 2008).

More recent work in game studies has often sought a middle ground between narratology and ludology. Aarseth himself, in a later paper, argued that ludology was never intended as an outright ban on any use of tools from narratology, but rather to emphasize the importance of studying the relationship between the mechanical and the semiotic in games, and to caution against the uncritical importation of terms like “narrative” and “story” into the study of games. Obviously, says Aarseth, there is much to be learned from the tools of narratology, since both traditional narratives and games contain worlds, agents, and events. To chart the space of games, Aarseth employs the narratological notions of kernel — primary events that define a particular story — and satellites — supplementary events that fill out the discourse. This leads to a typology of four basic game types: the linear game (like *Half-Life*: fixed kernels, flexible satellites), the hyper-text game (like *Myst*: choice of kernels, fixed satellites), the “creamy middle game” (like *Oblivion*: choice of kernels, flexible satellites), and the non-narrative game (like chess and *The Sims*: no kernels, flexible satellites, and thus, “just a game”) (Aarseth 2012).

Of these middle-ground approaches, perhaps the most influential is Jesper Juul's synthesis. In *Half-Real*, Juul argues that games are a hybrid form: part fictional and part real. They are real because they present real challenges and the opportunity to really win or lose. This leads Juul to an extended consideration of the aesthetics of challenge in games. There are at least two kinds of games, says Juul. There are games of progression, in which the game designer has set a series of formulated challenges to the player; one paradigmatic example is a story-driven, puzzle-based adventure game, like *Myst*. But there are also

games of emergence, in which the challenges emerge indirectly from interactions of the rules, as in *Pong* and chess. Juul offers the following heuristic: a game of progression may have a massive rule-set, but the solution is often simple — a “walk-through”. Typically, once you’ve solved a game of progression once, there’s nothing left to return to. Games of emergence, on the other hand, often have very simple rules, but the strategy guides can fill libraries (Juul 2004, 55-120). Note that different aesthetic pleasures may be associated from these various game kinds. For example, games of emergence typically permit more degrees of player freedom and thus a greater sense of self-expression in players as they surmount the challenges, whereas games of progression can offer participation in a pre-programmed narrative

But, says Juul, games are also fictional because they project a fictional world into which the player imaginatively enters. Juul is particularly interested in the interface between the real challenges and the fictional worlds. Sometimes, the rules and the fiction match up perfectly. This is often the case with a game’s presentation of space, when the rules about where a player can move precisely match the visual fiction. In other cases, a metaphor helps bridge the interface. For example, an in-game character can fictionally make a difficult serve, provided the real player makes a difficult, carefully timed button-press. The fact that both tasks are difficult helps the player make a metaphorical substitution. But elsewhere, rules and fiction conflict. In many games, some graphical doors can be opened, and others cannot; here, the fiction is in tension with the permitted gameplay (163-200).

It’s clear that the ludologists are right about their opening claim: computer games are not precisely the same as traditional narratives, and cannot be analyzed without some adaptations to those traditional tools. But it also seems clear that some tools can be

successfully refurbished and used to explain at least some aspects of games. But it seems advisable to remain cautious even on this front, for it's not clear that the refurbished tools of rhetorical and fictive analysis can provide a complete analysis of games. For example, if one accepted Suits' analysis that games were essentially about struggling to overcome obstacles, much of the discussion of games in terms of stories and fiction might seem to still miss the point. On the other hand, many figures in game studies have rejected the Suitsian approach precisely for failing to capture the fictive and role-playing aspects of computer games.

### **Interactivity and authorship**

I now turn to contemporary philosophy of art, which has recently concerned itself with understanding the special features of digital art, computer art, and interactive art. Following Lopes, I will call this category "computer art," which he defines as artworks which are interactive, and which are interactive because they are run on a computer (Lopes 2010, 27). Notice that, while the category of computer art may overlap with that of computer games, they are quite distinct. Some computer games may fail to be art depending on whatever definition of 'art' you happen to be committed to, and many interactive computer art museum installation lack certain game-like features, such as challenges or goals. But Lopes suggests that there may be a significant overlap between the categories of computer art and computer games. Perhaps because this field is not explicitly addressed to games as such, it is rarely referenced in the game studies literature. But the conversation is extremely relevant, for it focuses on novel features of computer art, which are shared by most computer games, such as the work's interactivity, computability, and

the way in which these factors might affect its aesthetic properties. I will not address here the discussion of whether computer games could count as 'art', which has been recently surveyed by Tavinor (Tavinor 2010). Instead, I am interested in how interactivity may or may not upend the traditional relationship between artist and audience.

Let's return to Flanagan's praise of serious games, which turns on categorizing games inside more familiar artistic forms. Flanagan makes a case for the cultural worth of games by showing that they can function as forms of social criticism. She compares games to certain strains of contemporary, politically active art — particularly conceptual art and performance art. She points, for example, to Gonzalo Frasca's game *September 12<sup>th</sup>: A Toy World*, a pointedly political game where the player is presented with a distanced view of a bustling Middle Eastern town in which various figures identifiable as 'terrorists' occasionally appear. The player's only mode of interaction is to manipulate some on-screen crosshairs and click a button to fire missiles from a distant missile platform. If the player attempts to kill the terrorists, they will quickly discover the missiles cause only destruction and death to innocent civilians, while increasing the number of terrorists. (Flanagan 2013, 239-40). Such serious games, says Flanagan, serve as both general social criticism and as criticism of the values embodied in ordinary popular games. Flanagan dubs the practice of designing and playing such disruptive, subversive games "critical play," and claims that it represents the avant-garde in game design (185-7, 243-62).

One worry about Flanagan's approach is that it may not help us to come to grips with the potentially unique aesthetic features of games. Flanagan speaks of games as a novel form, potentially disrupting the design process, and moving art towards a nonhierarchical, participatory exchange (256). However, much of her work stresses traditional

relationships between artist and audience. She relies on a traditional communicative model, in which one person plays the role of 'artist' and imbues the piece with meaning, and another person plays the role of 'audience' and receives this meaning. But is this actually the right model for computer games, given their interactivity? Paul Crowther, argues that computer art creates a novel relationship between "author" and "audience". While traditional artworks permit some limited audience interactivity by, for example, changing their position relative to the artwork, fully interactive computer art allow the user to alter the physical or virtual structure of the artwork itself. Thus, says Crowther, computer art is more open-ended than traditional artworks. In traditional artworks, additions or changes to the artwork are only permitted by the original creator or a specially endowed agent of the creator. In computer art, an audience member changes the artwork itself. Thus, says Crowther, digital artworks represent a new ontological kind of artwork. In orally transmitted artworks, such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, the work is never really authoritatively finalized — any supposedly final form is merely an arbitrary intervention. In artworks such as painting, the work is authoritatively finalized, and is thus, by nature, closed and stable. Crowther says that computer artworks are a hybrid. They have a stable, finalized component — the program — yet part of their nature remains crucially open and ever-changing. The computer artist relinquishes a crucial amount of control over the finished project. This opens the door to complex sorts of collective authorship unavailable in traditional works (Crowther 2008). In Crowther's view, artist and audience are, in an important sense, co-creators. This view is echoed by Annika Waern. Since games exist to be played, says Waern, the meaning of a game doesn't come from the game designer nor the

game player alone. The meaning of a game comes from both; it is structured by game design, but emerges through play (Waern 2012, 12).

Dominic Lopes rejects such views of collective authorship. The user of a piece of computer art may interact with the artwork, but this does not make them an author, says Lopes. The view of collective authorship seems to arise from a confusion about the exact ontology of an interactive artwork. We must be careful to distinguish between the artwork itself, and its displays. The display is the structured entity, which we tune into, to appreciate the work. For an oil painting, the display and the work are extremely ontologically close. For a novel, they are further apart — I am accessing the story by attending to words on a page, or the voice of an audiobook. For computer art, the work and the display are ontologically quite far apart. The display is something like a digital screen, displaying a variety of images. The artwork is the program, its associated hardware, and some prescriptions about its use. To think of the user as a kind of author, says Lopes, is to confuse an artwork with its displays. But, says Lopes, the artwork isn't the same as its displays. A user does not create a piece of computer art by generating its displays. Rather, a user properly appreciates an interactive artwork by exploring the space of possible displays that can be generated by the program (Lopes 2010, 92).

The pay-off for this careful ontological work is clear. Many have argued that computer games are a kind of art because they have similar appearances to more traditional art forms, such as painting or cinema. But, says Lopes, this won't actually help the case for computer art as a genuinely novel art kind. If we argue that the game *Myst* is a piece of art because of its lush graphics, then what makes it art won't be what makes it a game, since the graphics in and of themselves don't constitute the game. Instead, what makes games

unique is the interactivity of game-play; therefore a poetics of games ought to focus on how meaning is conveyed, not through graphics or story-lines, but through play (114-18).

Similarly, games from the “serious game” movement will sometimes, though retaining the surface features of a game, constrict and reduce interactivity for the sake of clearly communicating some political message. Under a communicative conception of computer art, this might count as a success. But one might plausibly extend Lopes’ work to criticize such games for failing, at least qua computer art, to take advantage of the interactivity of the medium.

Each of these accounts offers a different view of the relationship between author and audience. Despite Flanagan’s view that serious game upends the traditional relationship between game designers and players, she still holds to a fairly traditional view of the communicative relationship between author and audience. In Crowther’s view, on the other hand, the interactivity of games dissolves the line between author and audience; interactive arts are collectively authored by the game designer and the player, so they cannot have the traditional relationship of one person filling a work with meaning and another retrieving that meaning. Lopes’ view is an intermediate between the two. For Lopes, there is an authoritative relationship between the author and the audience. To experience the work, the audience must follow the norms of appreciation. However, proper appreciation of an interactive artwork involves exploring the space of possible interactions.

Lopes’ work, however, depends on a prescriptive ontology. Prescriptions concerning how we ought to appreciate a work partially constitute the particular work (Irvin 2005). A novel must be read in order; a piece of computer art must be interacted with. One notable dissenter to such a notion is Olli Tapio Leino. Leino wishes to resist what he calls the

“ludological doctrine of interpretation” — the view, which he attributes to Aarseth, that to understand a game, all we have to do is play it well. The ludological approach, says Leino, is problematic for computer games scholarship because it gives the game designer too much authority. For the ludologists, what it is to play a game is to interact with a game as the designer intended it — to take up the prescribed goals, and use the prescribed means. To make game-play the center of game-interpretation is to make the same mistake as treating authorial intent as the key to textual interpretation. Instead of this essentialist approach, and focuses on the “gameness” of games, Leino urges us to interpret the material game artifact as it exists — which permits us to ignore the prescriptions involved with playing a game as it was intended to be played. For example, rather than dismissing software bugs as outside of the designer’s intent, we should treat them as reasonable objects of scholarly interpretation (Leino 2012). I take it that Leino is, here, following the lead of those schools of literary theory that reject authorial intent as providing a guiding norm for interpretation, and applying those views to the interpretation of games. Where a ludologist might think that only somebody who was playing to win was really experience the game, Leino refuses any such restriction. But I am not so sure Leino’s views are really in tension with Lopes’. We might take them to be describing two ontologically adjacent entities with a similar material footprint. One is describing what it is to play the game, and the other what it is to interact with the software object.

### **Games as magic circles**

The approaches we have surveyed to this point have focused on games as an artifact and as an object of experience — to be read, interpreted, used as a prop, or understood. A distinctive approach is to characterize games, instead, in terms of their peculiar relationship to ordinary life. This line of thinking follows from Huizinga’s suggestion that to play a game is to enter into a magic circle, set apart from ordinary life. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in their widely read game design textbook *Rules of Play*, borrow the term from Huizinga, but offer a more robust formulation. For them, the magic circle is a bounded space for play, formally separated from everyday life. Game-play takes place in a precisely defined space and time. When a player crosses this tightly defined boundary, they enter an alternate world, where new rules have authority, and where actions and objects acquire new meanings (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 95-7).

This conception of the magic circle, though popular, has come under significant fire recently in game studies, typically from those with an anthropological or sociological bent, who insist that this approach problematically de-contextualizes game-play. Thomas Malaby takes aim at the idea of radical separability of game-play from ordinary-life; in particular, at the purported view that the actions within the magic circle have no consequences outside of the magic circle.<sup>3</sup> Malaby argues that games are only partially bounded and that the boundary is highly permeable. Examples abound. In gambling games, money enters and leaves the circle. Even when there aren’t explicit financial stakes, there are often social ones: as a result of in-game play, players may gain or lose status or renown in the ordinary world. Malaby argues that Salen and Zimmerman’s view is founded on the normative

---

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Zimmerman himself rejects this attribution. Zimmerman claims that the view of games as entirely separate worlds was never really present in *Rules of Play*, and is something of a straw man (Zimmerman 2012).

presumption that the purpose of games is play, and that play is essentially non-productive. Malaby urges instead that we look at the actuality of games, including those many instances in which games are taken very seriously — such as professional sports and gambling (Malaby 2007).

Others have argued that carefully looking at the actuality of play, especially in digital spaces, reveals problems with the magic circle conception. T. L. Taylor focuses on massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), such as *World of Warcraft*, and points to how game-play is constantly informed by discussion outside of the game, such as on community message boards (Taylor 2009, 2007). Similarly, Mia Consalvo argues that the MMO practice of gold farming — selling laboriously generated in-game products for real-world cash — breaches the magic circle (Consalvo 2009, 408-9).

Many of these criticisms of the magic circle are taken to be criticisms of a general underlying intellectual approach to games, called formalism. Formalism is the view that the essential nature of a game is its rule-set, and that proper play involves obeying the rules. This view has been attributed to Suits, Salen, Zimmerman, Juul and many of the ludologists. Malaby argues that games are not formally fixed structures, but ongoing processes within specific cultural contexts. Rules are often changed or ignored for reasons that are only comprehensible in their cultural context. Games are “moving targets, capable of generating new, emergent effects that then inform the following instances of the game” (Malaby 2007, 103). Consider the *World of Warcraft* glider, a cheat program designed to automate certain simple character actions and save the player from having to go through the tedious grind of leveling up. The magic circle view — and formalism in general — can’t cope with the WoW glider, says Consalvo. The formalist’s only resources are to reject users of the glider as real

players, and reject that what they're doing is really part of the game-world. But, says Consalvo, the glider surely exists in the game-world of *World of Warcraft*. It has effects even on those players who follow the rules by impacting various in-game markets; it even motivates angry players to gang together and kill glided characters (Consalvo 2009).

These arguments clearly problematize the most radical version of the magic circle view — that playing a game involves entering into theoretical space which is radically, perfectly and unbreachably separated from normal life. Jaakko Stenros has tried to defend a more reasonable version of the magic circle. All this talk of the magic circle has been clearly gesturing at something important, says Stenros; the problem has been a blurring together of what are really quite distinctive phenomena. Stenros unpacks what he takes to be three different notions: the psychological bubble, the arena, and the magic circle proper. The psychological bubble is the playful state of mind, a frame which guides the way a particular player interprets the experiences of play. It requires no communication; a person can enter this psychological bubble by themselves and play alone. Then there is the arena of play, which is a culturally recognized structure for playful action. Such arenas do not guarantee play, though they do encourage it, and stand as physical residues of play. Finally, the magic circle proper is a social contract created through negotiation and extra-game communication for mutual play. Stenros' version of a magic circle is not a guaranteed impermeable border; rather, it is a *norm* of impermeability. In the magic circle, participants are supposed to treat game events as disconnected from the external world, and supposed to discard external motivations — though, as a matter of fact, they may fail to (Stenros 2012). These distinctions seem to dissolve many of the earlier criticisms. For example, says Stenros, Taylor's criticism of the magic circle depends on mapping the normal life/magic

circle distinction onto the offline/online distinction (3). But if we apply Stenros' distinctions, we see that the online, multiplayer virtual environment is not the magic circle proper, nor does it guarantee the mental attitude of play. It is, instead, merely an arena in which play may occur which, by itself, carries no guarantee of impermeability.

Similarly, Annika Waern suggests that that we can refine the magic circle concept in the following way: games can be usefully thought of as systems of rules with two special properties. First, we take them up for internal and experiential purposes. Second, they involve agreed upon re-significations of player actions — that is, players agree ahead of time to assign actions within the game new meanings (Waern 2012). As with Stenros, Waern emphasizes the normative and contractual aspects involved in setting up the game-space, but makes no claim of radical impermeability. What constitutes the magic circle is the agreement to re-signify, and not some mysterious magical force which somehow guarantees a successful re-signification. Stenros and Waern's particular emphasis on the contractual aspects of games may, in part, arise from their interest in various sorts of social games, including live-action role-playing games and pervasive games like Pokemon Go (Montola, Stenros and Waern 2009).

### **The philosophy of sports**

An even more radical departure from the above approaches can be found in the philosophy of sport. To paint with a broad brush, literary theorists and philosophers of art typically focus on games as designed *artifacts*, while the philosophy of sport investigate game-playing as an *activity*. The artifactual approach leads to emphasizing questions about

the artifact's designer, its circumstances and purpose of design, and the player's relationship to that designer. What is the meaning? What was the designer's intent? The philosophy of sport, on the other hand, rarely treats games as representational artifacts or as objects for interpretation. Rather, the typical framework is some variant of social contract theory: games are sets of rules that people consent to follow. This leads to questions about why and how players take up those rules, and what norms might structure the ensuing activity. (As a sociological aside, many figures in game studies and aesthetics come from backgrounds in art, literary criticism, and cultural studies. Many philosophers of sport, on the other hand, come from backgrounds in ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of law.)

The philosophy of sport is a rich and varied terrain, so I will only attempt to extract some of the key ideas that might be relevant to the study of games in general. Here, questions about the ontology of games, and about the norms and value of games, usually go hand-in-hand. Where do the norms of game-play come from? One dominant view in the early philosophy of sports was formalism: that the game consists simply of the explicit rules, and that proper game behavior consisted solely in following those rules. Suits' definition of games was often taken to be formalist. But formalism has come under considerable fire. For example: under formalism, how does one conceptualize the cheater? If playing the game consists of following the rules, then it follows that the cheater is not playing the game. This result seems improbable. For example, it is commonly held that Atlanta Braves pitcher Gaylord Perry threw spitballs in every game he played in. If formalism were true, argues Craig Lehman, then, strictly speaking, no event in which Perry pitched would count as a baseball game. This is surely absurd. Lehman suggests that we

need to look outside the rules themselves to particular communities' customs of play to individuate the game (Lehman 1981). (Arguments against formalism in the philosophy of sport run in fascinating parallel to the arguments against formalism in the computer games discussion, though the two literatures seem to show no awareness of one another.)

One very influential recent response is to locate the essence of a game in something beyond the rules called the *ethos of the game*. The ethos might be thought of as, loosely, the purpose of the activity, which can guide both the selection of rules and behavior outside the rules.<sup>4</sup> The ethos approach has several advantages. First, says William Morgan, formalists have no ability to explain why a rule might be good, bad, or in need of replacement, where the ethos approach can arbitrate such discussions by referring to the purpose of a game (Morgan 2004). Second, there seem to be clear norms of good sportsmanship that guide behavior in circumstances where the rules are ambiguous or silent. Formalism cannot explain those norms, where the ethos approach can. Here is a standard example: suppose one professional golf player has lost their golf clubs during their flight. Another competitor happens to have a spare set of clubs; should she loan her spare clubs to her unlucky opponent? There are no explicit rules about the matter. The purest sort of formalist should say then that, since the explicit rules are silent on the matter, then the game is silent on the matter. Such formalists will then usually attribute norms of good sportsmanship to extra-game social or ethical considerations. But the ethos approach can offer an explanation of the norms of good sportsmanship, internal to the game itself.

---

<sup>4</sup> The phrase "ethos of the game" seemed to have been coined by Fred d'Agostino, but recent usage seems to have drifted from his original presentation (d'Agostino 1981).

Robert Simon suggests that we can usefully borrow from Ronald Dworkin's legal theory here to think about the ethos of a sport, and explain its normative force. Dworkin was concerned with what might guide our interpretations of the laws, as written. He suggests that we can derive, from a particular set of explicit laws, a sense for the guiding values behind those laws from inference to the best explanation. Those guiding values can help inform how we interpret ambiguities in the laws. Simon suggests, accordingly, that we can derive from the rules of golf that the guiding purpose of golf's rules is to support competitions against a worthy opponent. So in the club-loaning case, the competitor ought to loan her unlucky opponent her spare golf clubs, in order to have a competition against a worthy opponent (Simon 2000).

More importantly, the ethos approach is usually taken to locate the value of sport in the activity itself. Take, for instance, J.S. Russell's view of the ethos of sport:

...Games create opportunities for developing certain human excellences by presenting obstacles that must be mastered and overcome in order to achieve the goal set by the game. (Russell 2004, 146)

The approach is usually offered as part of a defense of what is called "broad internalism" or "interpretivism" about the value of sport — namely, that the activity of sport is valuable on its own, and that this value may even run counter to the values of the prevailing culture (Dixon 2003). This is to contrast to "externalism" about sports — the view that sports are valuable only instrumentally, and usually done for the sake of values held by the dominant culture.

Various flavors of broad internalism and the ethos approach can be found throughout contemporary philosophy of sport. Joseph Lewandowski argues that boxing is a set of constraints, mutually undertaken by the boxers, in order to encourage creativity and skill-

development — similarly to the way in which poets might take up, say, sonnet form, as a self-imposed constraint to encourage creativity and skill (Lewandowski 2007). Similarly, Steven Weimer argues that striking a person in boxing is morally good, so long as it is according to the rules, because the participants have not only consented to such strikes, but have formed a social contract in which they have promised to strike each other. Therefore, says Weimer, striking your opponent is good, since it fulfills your contractually obligated duties. Furthermore, the reason for this social contract is that we wish to create a setting in which we can realize human flourishing by realizing specific human excellences (Weimer 2014). Similar views have been used to ground specific arguments about establishing norms concerning blood doping, strategic fouling in basketball, and retaliatory fouling in baseball (Simon 2007; Dixon 2010; Jones 2010).

These views have normative bite. Formalism only tells us that it is wrong to break the rules; internalism can offer us grounds for criticizing a rule, and a basis for selecting a better one. For example, R. Scott Kretchmer argues that time-delimited games are inherently flawed because they encourage play that is against the ethos of the game. The purpose of games, says Kretchmer, is to provide a fair test between competitors. Thus, the game needs to provide as many tests of skill as possible. But in time-delimited games, often the best strategy is to get slightly ahead and then stall in a low-risk manner and run out the clock, which actually reduces the number of tests of skill. In these games, says Kretchmer, the attempt to achieve the in-game goal actually frustrates the real purpose of games. Thus, for instance, a game of “first team to a hundred points” is better than the game of “highest score after an hour of play” because there is no conflict between the winning strategy and the deeper purpose of playing games. And a timed game, when it must be played, will be

improved by rules that prevent stalling; the shot-clock was introduced into basketball for just this reason (Kretchmar 2005).

When we probe these internalist pictures for specific accounts of value, the answers we find are radically different from those that emerge from aesthetics and literary theory. Rather than speaking of meaning or expressiveness, the philosophy of sports has cited such goods as achievement, excellence, increased motivation, flow states, and even epistemic benefits like the increased knowledge of one's ability to move through space and time (Ciomaga 2012, 102-3). If these arguments are successful, it seems they should also apply to computer games, board games, and the like. It seems curious that the majority of philosophical discussion over computer games considers their value largely as representative artifacts — as fictions, or rhetoric — and largely neglects to consider their value as sites of skilled activity.

There are, however, a number of modern dissenters from the internalist tradition. Morgan finds internalism's commitment to normative realism alone sufficient grounds to reject it (Morgan 2004). Ciomaga argues that the normativity of a game comes not from the rules themselves, but from particular agreements made by particular communities about how to play. The norms, for example, of a friendly game of basketball will be quite different from the norms of a professional game, which will, in turn, be quite different from a game of trash-talking street ball. Game rules are to be conceived of as instructions, not binding norms. They are rather like recipes — instructions for cooking which, in and of themselves, have no normativity, and which may be freely interpreted and modified depending on an external considerations (Ciomaga 2013).

We can already see that the philosophy of sport adopts an entirely different approach to the value of games. For the philosophers of sport, the value of games is usually hashed out in terms of the desirability of the activity of playing the game, rather than in terms of the value of the game itself and the value of appreciating its inherent aesthetic qualities. We might say that, in the philosophy of sports, games are often treated as something like governments: we all agree to the same rule-set because there's something we want to get done together. Interestingly, the paradigmatic cases for most work in computer game aesthetics are single-player computer games, whereas the paradigmatic cases for philosophers of sport are multi-player games.

Philosophy of sports has, in fact, discussed the aesthetic experience of sports, but here, again, the investigation has gone down a very different path. In work on the aesthetics of computer games, the object of aesthetic attention is usually the game itself; we are evaluating the game, as an object of appreciation, for its aesthetic properties. Sports aesthetics has focused, instead, on the aesthetics of player actions — such as an athlete's graceful kick, the drama of a last-minute win (Hughson and Inglis 2002). When sports aesthetics discusses the game directly, it often shows up only as a context for generating aesthetically worthwhile play. Sports aesthetics has, instead, often focused on explaining the unique relationship between aesthetic enjoyment and sporting success. David Best argues that the perception of gracefulness is actually a perception of functionality — of efficiency and economy of style (Best 1976). C. D. Corder responds by pointing to examples of graceless efficiency — of ugly, but winning play — and argues instead that gracefulness consists in a harmony of all the elements of successful performance, which is distinguishable from a performance's merely being successful (Corder 1984).

Furthermore, computer game aesthetics usually treats the *player's* experience as the primary mode of aesthetic appreciation, where the sports aesthetics typically concentrates on the *spectators'* experience of watching players. One particularly interesting discussion concerns whether or not the victory-orientation of sporting events presents a problem for aesthetic enjoyment — a.k.a., the “partisans and purists” debate. Stephen Mumford argues that there is trade-off between being emotionally involved and having aesthetic experiences. A partisan observer — the fan of a particular team — gains certain dramatic and emotional experiences, but is too biased to have the kind of disinterestedness characteristic of aesthetic experiences. Mumford argues that the superior sports observer is the sports purist, who seeks to appreciate and understand the depth of strategy and brilliance of play of the athletes, without preferring a particular side (Mumford 2012, 2013, 1-18).

### **Ethics of Games**

We can now see why the discussion of the ethics of games has been so splintered. On the one hand, those concerned with games as representative texts tend to worry about the ethical implications of the represented content in games — about, say, graphic violence in games. On the other hand, the philosophy of sport has been much more concerned with the ethics of inter-player actions in games — cheating, fouling, fair play, and the spirit of sportsmanship.

Here's a typical question from videogame ethics: is something wrong with fictionally killing an innocent person in *Grand Theft Auto*? Matt McCormick has argued that neither the utilitarian nor Kantian model can provide an adequate basis for declaring fictional

game killings universally wrong. Since the killing is only fictional, the utilitarian can only count the harms that accrue from a long-term change in behavior from the player of violent video games. A utilitarian answer will, then, depend on a contingent cost-benefit analysis of the bad psychological effects versus the positive pleasures of play, and not deliver a clear verdict. A Kantian account might tell us that it's wrong to be a bad sport towards your competitor, but that's a harm that is neither unique to, nor necessarily a result of, violent video game — there are just as many opportunities to be a bad sport in chess as in an online shooter. The only account that might show a direct wrong to violent video games, says McCormick, is an Aristotelean virtue ethics, which could claim that in acting out simulated crimes, we are reinforcing virtueless habits and dispositions in ourselves (McCormick 2001).

A related puzzle concerns the strange variability of our intuitions about what fictional acts are acceptable in a video game. Morgan Luck poses a “gamer’s dilemma”: how could one consistently hold both that virtual murder was acceptable, but that virtual pedophilia was unacceptable? Shouldn’t any defenses of the former also work for the latter (Luck 2009)? Stephanie Patridge defends our asymmetrical intuitions by focusing, not at the wrongness of the in-game act itself, but rather on the wrong of enjoying certain types of fictional representation. Certain images, says Patridge, have an incorrigible social meaning — a meaning which is fixed and unavoidable, given a particular social history. For example, particular racist, anti-black images have an incorrigible social meaning in the United States. Most video games representations — of killing enemy factions or spies — are insulated from our moral reality, and do not have those incorrigible meanings. But certain types of images, which target particular groups — racial minorities, women, children — do have, in

the right context, such an incorrigible social meaning, and so it is wrong to enjoy them, even as fictions (Patridge 2011). Christopher Bartel offers a parallel response: virtual murder is not murder of any sort, says Bartel, but virtual pedophilia is child pornography, and so consuming it is morally wrong (Bartel 2012).

Even if one doesn't think there is a problem with enacting fictive violence, there might be higher-order moral problem for games. Miguel Sicart offers a subtle treatment of the moral problems and opportunities of representational games. Sicart does not take simulated moral wrongs to be actually wrong in any obvious way. Rather, he says, simulated moral wrongs are actually an opportunity to stimulate moral reflection. The crucial question is actually whether the game's design encourages or squashes moral reflection. The genuinely worrying cases, he says, are actually games like *Knights of the Old Republic*, which output a quantitative ethical evaluation of a player's actions based on pre-determined moral parameters. You get "good points" for saving people, and "evil points" for stealing from them. Many people have praised these sorts of games for rewarding morally good behavior. Sicart argues the reverse: this quantitative scoring of morality, says Sicart, achieves something like what Hannah Arendt described as the banality of evil. "By alienating the player from reflecting about the ethics of their actions and outsourcing moral evaluation to a closed, pre-designed system, the game effectively limits players' ethical agency" (Sicart 2009, 193,198). The problem is the same whether the game rewards the player quantitatively for doing good or doing evil — in both cases, the player is merely following the rules and divorcing themselves from substantive ethical reflection. Much better, says Sicart, a game where the player is given morally charged choices, but where the

game provides no moral scoring or judgment of its own, leaving moral evaluation in the hands of the player (Sicart, 2011).

The philosophy of sport, on the other hand, has largely focused on the ethics of what players actually do to each other, including issues such as the justifiability of physical harm in sport, and the nature of fair play. There are a great many individual topics, but a few examples will serve to illustrate the sorts of issues under discussion. First, consider the issue of performance enhancement. There are methods of performance enhancement that strike many as legitimate (taking vitamins, drinking coffee, working out), and some that do not (steroids, blood doping). But how might we draw that line, exactly? The issue is compounded when we consider prosthetics that might count as simple physical repair, but might also improve performance past the human norm. Is there a principled way to draw a line and distinguish between, say, legitimate nutritional supplementation and illegitimate performance enhancement? The issue is quite thorny, says Brown. The standard of enhancing skilled performance will not do, for steroid use surely enhances skilled performance. Nor can we use considerations about avoiding risk and damage to the body, since there are many sports in which all participants incur significant risks (Brown 1990).

Here we can see the consequences of one's precise conception of the purpose of sport. Loland distinguishes between two possible internalist theories of sport: one, that the core value of sport is maximizing *performance*, and the other, that sport is for the development of virtues and abilities in the *performer*. If the core value lies simply in the achievement of maximal performance, then there is no principled reason, internal to the practice of sport, to forbid performance enhancing drugs or cybernetic enhancements. But if the core value of sport is to provide a sphere in which individuals have a fair opportunity for personal

development — perhaps one more fair than everyday life — then we have a reason to forbid performance enhancing drugs and cybernetic drugs. Various technological enhancements externalize athlete development: they move the responsibility from the athlete herself to external technological and medical sources (Loland 2004).

Notice that these field-specific discussions actually have a very broad scope of application. First, the majority of work in computer game ethics has focused on single-player, story-driven games. But an increasingly vast chunk of actual computer game play is spent in multiplayer competitive environments, to which much of the work from sports ethics has significant relevance. Some philosophers of sport have already noted the existence of professional e-Sport competitions. But the applicability of philosophy of sports is far broader than simply e-Sports. A vast chunk of everyday computer gaming is now multiplayer and competitive, from multiplayer shooters, to online battle arena games such as *League of Legends*, to online collectible card games such as *Hearthstone*, to highly competitive massively multiplayer online games such as *EVE Online*. The same questions of fairness and good sportsmanship arise there, as do questions of technologically mediated performance enhancement. The philosophy of sports has already laid much of the groundwork to answers those questions. Some accounts of the social value of the sport can also be applied broadly, across all forms of games. Simon argues that sports are a way of cooperating to help each other achieve physical excellence (Simon 2014). C. Thi Nguyen argues that such players are not straightforwardly cooperate with each other. Rather, players try to win, and design features of the game transform that competition into cooperation. This places a significant moral responsibility on the game design, rather than simply player intent (Nguyen 2017). Nguyen and Jose Zagal have applied this view to

resolve ethical dilemmas in online gaming, such as trash-talk and online harassment (Nguyen and Zagal 2016).

Similarly, much of the work the ethics of videogames can be applied to sports. For example, if McCormick is right that the act of fictional violence in videogames creates a moral habit, then it also may be true that watching or participating in non-fictional violence in boxing might create a problematic moral habit. In fact, one might argue that participating in unrestricted competition in games might create a problematic moral habit — encouraging, for example, the voracious aggression found, say, on Wall Street. And perhaps Sicart's work can be adapted from story-driven games to cover all sorts of games, including sports. For example: if Sicart is right, and simplified 'moral' scoring systems in games threaten to produce in players an unreflective and oversimplified attitude toward morality in life, then perhaps aesthetic scoring systems in sports such as figure skating threaten to produce in athletes and audiences an unreflective and oversimplified attitude towards beauty — a banality of the aesthetic.

## **Conclusions**

The ludologists claim that games are a substantially novel artifact and demand new (or significantly refurbished) conceptual tools. Surely it is right that games cannot be straightforwardly annexed under traditional theories of, say, linear narrative. But there is much reason to suspect that judicious adaptation from other frameworks will bear at least some useful fruit. I've suggested that, in the philosophical analysis of games at least, there are at least two ruling frameworks that have been applied to games with varying degrees of success. First, from various schools of aesthetics, we have found tools to think about games

as objects of appreciation. In some cases, appreciation involves interrogating a game in representational terms — looking for its story, its meaning, its social criticism. The discussion of games as artworks has yielded other useful results concerning the exact nature of the proper object of appreciation, and the relationship between artist and audience in interactive works.

Philosophers of sport, on the other hand, have approached games with an entirely different framework. This has led into investigations about the normative nature of games — what guides the choice of rules, and how those rules might be applied, interpreted, or even changed. Furthermore, philosophers of sport have investigated games as social practices and as forms of life. We might say that aestheticists have given valuational accounts about the game itself, or about the experience of the game, while philosophers of sports have given valuational accounts of performance in games. It is important, for example, that the idea that it might be valuable to be *skillful* at a game arises very rarely in the aesthetic discourse, but constantly in the philosophy of sport. Thomas Hurka's reading of Suits, for example, leads Hurka to conclude that game activities are more valuable when they are more difficult, and that games are praiseworthy when they present genuinely difficult challenges (Hurka 2006).

Subtler differences abound. For example, some work on games takes as its paradigm of game-play something like children's play. Play, in this conception, is the opposite of work. Thus, being excessively competitive, being in it for the money, and caring too much about winning, are all usually seen as failures of play. Sicart, for example, has argued that excessively competitive, rule-bound game-play is, in fact, a failure of the essential spirit of playfulness (Sicart 2014). The philosophy of sports, on the other hand, often treats

professional sports as the paradigmatic case for analysis, and focused competitiveness as the paradigmatic form of play. Their focus on excellence, achievement, and fair competition might provide a better justification for relatively rigid rule-adherence, contra Sicart.

Although there is still dissent within the philosophy of sport; Mike McNamee, for example, to criticize the rank-obsession of professional sports and the consequent zero-sum nature of sporting activity (McNamee 2002, 40-1).

We have restricted our conversation here to philosophical work on games and excluded the discussion of play in general. But, of course, play provides another framework for analysis. Tellingly, Stenros and Waern point out that earlier anthropological and psychological approaches treated games as an activity of play and foregrounded the active role of the players in creating play. On the other hand, computer game studies has tended to treat games as structures or systems, and has been interested in how those systems give rise to play (Stenros and Waern 2010) Waern suggests a hybrid path, and urges games scholars to treat games both as systems of rules and as inherently playful activities (Waern 2012). Their work and other work in the very small and very new field on table-top role-playing games and live action role-playing games is particularly fascinating, for such games do not fit comfortably within many traditional models of games. They are not competitive, nor do they offer anything that resembles traditional objects for aesthetic appreciation. However, such game are often engaged in for very self-consciously aesthetic reasons. Take, for instance, Nordic LARPs (live action role playing) — extended multi-day role-playing events, which draw from both tabletop role-playing traditions and improvisational theater. Stenros claims that Nordic LARPs are a particularly challenging case for game scholars. First, they are explicitly co-creative — the primary work is not usually taken to be the game

rules, but rather the final, improvised performance. Second, they are aimed at a first-person audience — that is, the primary audience for the improvised work is the players themselves (Stenros and Montola 2011).

It seems evident, to me at least, that games have the capacity to be many things: objects of aesthetic appreciation; designed systems which structure play; venues for skilled activities and competition; and goads to something like children’s play. Philosophers who think about games have often stuck firmly one of those frameworks and de-emphasized or actively excluded the others. The interdisciplinary field of game studies is starting to move towards a synthesis of these frameworks, as exemplified in figures such as Juul, Waern, and Stenros. It is also beginning to study the phenomena that arise at the interface between these frameworks. Philosophers, on the other hand, have thought with enormous care about these frameworks independently, but have rarely sought to connect them. There is tremendously refined philosophical work on the nature of the ludic attitude, the nature of digital interactivity, the nature of interactive fiction, and the value of competition. But the most important work, in my mind, lies ahead, in synthesizing insights across these disciplines.

*Postscript (added June 1, 2020):*

Since the original publication of this *Philosophy Compass* article, I have developed my own take on these issues, now published in “Games and the art of agency” (*Philosophical Review* 128 (4), 2019) and *Games: Agency as Art* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Let me summarize my views.

Games, I argue, are the art form that works in the medium of agency. This means that the game designer doesn't just make a story, character or environment. The game designer designates who the player will be in the game by shaping their abilities and setting their goals. In doing so, the designer creates the motivations for the in-game agent. And the player, when they play a game, temporarily takes on those sculpted motivations. And we often do so for the sake of aesthetic experiences of our own actions, decisions, and movements. Games aren't an art just because they have pretty graphics, or a present fiction in a new way. Games are a unique artform, that sculpt agency for the sake of the player's experience of their own beauty, grace, and drama in action.

We learn something crucial about the motivational structure of play from this analysis. In many cases, our purposes for playing the game are different from the in-game goals we pursue during the game. Often, we play for fun, but in order to have fun, we have to focus all-out on winning. Games teach us, then, that we are capable of an enormous amount of agential fluidity. We can take on temporary goals and submerge ourselves in them.

This capacity enables us to make use of games as a recording medium. Consider: we have many technologies for recording and transmitting parts of our experience. Novels lets us record stories; paintings let us record sights. Games, I suggest, let us record and transmit modes of agency. Thus, games form a library of agencies, and when we explore that library, we can learn more ways of occupying our own agency.

## **Bibliography**

Aarseth, Espen. 2012. A narrative theory of games. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*.

Aarseth, Espen J. 1997. *Cybertext : Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Bartel, Christopher. 2012. Resolving the gamers dilemma. *Ethics and Information Technology* 14 (1): 11-16.
- Best, David. 1976. The Aesthetic in Sport. *British Journal of Aesthetics*. 14(3): 197-213.
- Bogost, Ian. 2008. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 2010. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Brown, W Miller. 1990. Practices and prudence. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 17 (1): 71-84.
- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago: University of Illinois, 2001.
- Ciomaga, Bogdan. 2013. Rules and obligations. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 40 (1): 19-40.
- Consalvo, Mia. 2009. There is no magic circle. *Games and Culture*. (4) 4: 408-17.
- Cordner, C D. 1984. Grace and functionality. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 24 (4): 301-313.
- Crowther, Paul. 2008. Ontology and aesthetics of digital art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2): 161-170.
- d'Agostino, Fred. 1981. The ethos of games. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 8 (1): 7-18.
- Dixon, Nicholas. 2003. Canadian figure skaters, french judges, and realism in sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 30 (2): 103-116.
- . 2010. A critique of violent retaliation in sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 37 (1): 1-10.
- Eskelinen, Markku. 2001. The gaming situation. *Game Studies* 1 (1): 68.
- Feezell, Randolph. 2010. A pluralist conception of play. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 37 (2): 147-165.
- Flanagan, Mary. 2013. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Frasca, Gonzalo. 1999. Ludology meets narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative. *Parnasso* 3:365-71.
- . 2003. Simulation versus narrative. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge: New York. 221-235.
- Henry, Jenkins. 2002. Game design as narrative architecture. In *First Person: New Media As Story, Performance, and Game*. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hughson, John and David Inglis. 2002. Inside the beautiful game: Towards a merleau-pontian phenomenology of soccer play. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 29 (1): 1-15.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Cult*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hurka, Thomas. 2006. Games and the good. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 40 (1): 217-264.
- Irvin, Sherri. 2005. The artist's sanction in contemporary art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (4): 315-326.
- Jones, Carwyn. 2010. Doping in cycling: Realism, antirealism and ethical deliberation. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 37 (1): 88-101.
- Juul, Jesper. 2001. Games telling stories. *Game Studies* 1 (1): 45.
- . 2004. *Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. IT University of Copenhagen, Digital Aesthetics and Communication.
- Konzack, Lars. 2009. Philosophical game design. *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge. 33-44.
- Kretchmar, R Scott. 2005. Game flaws. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 32 (1): 36-48.
- Kretchmar, Scott. 2012. Competition, redemption, and hope. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 39 (1): 101-116.
- Lehman, Craig K. 1981. Can cheaters play the game? *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 8 (1): 41-46.
- Leino, Olli Tapio. 2012. Death loop as a feature. *Game Studies* 12 (2).
- Lewandowski, Joseph. 2007. Boxing: The sweet science of constraints. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34 (1): 26-38.
- Loland, Sigmund. 2004. Normative theories of sport: A critical review. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 31 (2): 111-121.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver. 2010. *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. New York: Routledge.
- Luck, Morgan. 2009. The gamers dilemma: An analysis of the arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia. *Ethics and Information Technology* 11 (1): 31-36.
- Malaby, T. M. 2007. Beyond play: A new approach to games. *Games and Culture* 2 (2): 95-113.
- McCormick, Matt. 2001. Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology* 3 (4): 277-287.
- McNamee, Mike. 2002. Hubris, humility, and humiliation: Vice and virtue in sporting communities. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 29 (1): 38-53.

- Montola, Markus, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern. 2009. *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*. Burlington: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers Inc.
- Morgan, William J. 2004. Moral antirealism, internalism, and sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 31 (2): 161-183.
- Mumford, Stephen. 2012. Emotions and aesthetics: An inevitable trade-off? *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 39 (2): 267-279.
- . 2013. *Watching Sport: Aesthetics, Ethics and Emotion*. New York: Routledge.
- Murray, Janet Horowitz. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Nguyen, C. Thi. 2017. Competition as cooperation. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 44 (1): 123-37.
- Nguyen, C. Thi and Jose Zagal. 2016. Good violence, bad violence: The ethics of competition in multiplayer games. *DiGRA/FDG '16 – Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/good-violence-bad-violence-the-ethics-of-competition-in-multiplayer-games/>.
- Partridge, Stephanie. 2011. The incorrigible social meaning of video game imagery. *Ethics and Information Technology* 13 (4): 303-312.
- Robson, Jon and Aaron Meskin. 2016. Video games as self-involving interactive fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2): 165-177.
- Russell, J.S. 2004. Moral realism in sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 31 (1); 142-160.
- Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. 2004. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2009. The banality of simulated evil: Designing ethical gameplay. *Ethics and Information Technology* 11 (3): 191-202.
- . 2011. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 2014. *Play Matters*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Simon, Robert L. 2007. Violence in sport. In *Ethics in Sport*. Ed. William Morgan. Champaign: Human Kinetics.
- . 2014. *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Simon, Robert L. 2000. Internalism and internal values in sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 27:1-16.
- Stenros, Jaakko. 2012. In defence of a magic circle: The social and mental boundaries of play. In *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global - Games in Culture and Society*. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/12168.43543.pdf>.
- Stenros, Jaakko and Annika Waern. 2010. Games as activity: Correcting the digital fallacy. In *Videogame Studies: Concepts, Cultures and Communication*. Ed. Evans, Monica. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press. <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/vg2ever13103111.pdf>
- Stenros, Jaakko and Markus Montola. 2011. The making of nordic larp: Documenting a tradition of ephemeral co-creative play. In *DiGRA '11 - Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play*. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/11301.57224.pdf>
- Suits, Bernard. 2005. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Peterborough: Broadview.
- Tavinor, Grant. 2009. *The Art of Videogames*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- . 2010. Videogames and aesthetics. *Philosophy Compass* 5 (8): 624-634.
- Taylor, Tina L. 2009. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. MIT Press.
- Taylor, T L. 2007. Pushing the borders: Player participation and game culture. *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*. 112-130.
- Waern, Annika. 2012. Framing games. *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2012*.
- Weimer, Steven. 2014. Consent, context, and obligations: A response to ciomaga. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 41 (2): 233-245.
- Wolf, Mark JP and Bernard Perron. 2014. *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Zimmerman, Eric. 2012. Jerked around by the magic circle: Clearing the air ten years later. *Gamasutra, February 7th*.