Art, Aesthetics, and the Medium:

Comments for Nguyen on the Art-Status of Games

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**1 Introduction**

Nguyen offers a number of profound insights about the nature and value of games. Games are works of art, according to Nguyen, because they offer players aesthetic experiences. Game designers aim to craft particular sets of affordances that offer players the chance to make particular kinds of decisions in an environment where their decisions become meaningful. Players in turn take pleasure in making those decisions. This ability to take pleasure in one’s own experience is a distinctive feature of the aesthetics of games. The aesthetic value of games is not found in winning, but is instead a value one finds in striving. Nguyen argues that this must be explained by reference to what he calls ‘layered agency’. On the surface, players seek to win; but deeper down, players enjoy the striving. The specific kind of enjoyment one experiences is directed at feeling one’s own agency at play in games. And, as games are works of art, then their medium is agency. Nguyen’s account of the value of games, the psychology of agency, and the nature of striving all offer important advancements in the philosophy of games. But, does it really matter whether games are *art*? Would the insights that Nguyen offers be any less insightful if we abandoned our worries about the art-status of games?

The instinct to defend games-as-art is an understandable and reasonable one. Games *are* an important part of human life. They have been with us for millennia. Game theorists rightly want to draw attention to the importance that games have in our lives. It is reasonable, then, to try comparing games to art—an unambiguously important cultural kind. Nguyen’s account of the art-status of games is motivated by such worries. And to be honest, I share these worries too. I bristle whenever I read other theorists approvingly quote Roger Ebert’s (2010) rant against the artistic possibilities of video games. I have spent time and mental energy worrying about Brock Rough’s (2018) claim that *games* and *art* are incompatible categories. And when friends or relatives suggest that my love of games is a waste of time, I too feel tempted to draw comparisons to art.

Despite such temptations, I hold that the desire to draw games into the realm of art is a distraction, not because games fail to be art, but rather because *art* is not nearly as important of a concept as we might think. What does it matter whether games are ‘works of art’? Why bring in the loaded and weighty term ‘art’? I take it that powerlifting is a Suitsian game; but, does it matter whether powerlifting is art? My skepticism about the art-status of games does not come from some conservative need to confine art to nice, respectable, Western classical works. Rather, my skepticism comes from a broader worry about ‘art’ entirely. *Art* is a concept that has come down to us from a colonialist past that has more to do with maintaining and defining cultural prestige than it really has to do with ‘art itself’. Attempts at defining ‘art’ over the past century have revealed that the concept has become associated with a host of competing values—like artisanal skills, expressions of emotion, formalist beauty, classical conservatism, and the values of the avant garde. The concept *art* today is a conceptual Frankenstein’s monster, made up of numerous incompatible parts that were each designed to solve different problems for different times; yet, many theorists are unwilling to give up on the centrality of any of these values. As it currently stands, *art* is at best a confusing and incoherent concept, one that we might be better off without. I do not deny that games are ‘art’ because I want to defend some elitist conception of art, but rather because I think ‘art’ is a term mired in cultural baggage that we should abandon.[[1]](#footnote-1) This skepticism aside, we should examine Nguyen’s defense of the art-status of games on its own merits.

*Art*, *aesthetics*, and the *medium* are three interrelated concepts in Nguyen’s account. Games are works of art because they produce aesthetic experiences; and being works of art, they also have a medium. Each of these terms stands on the strength of the others. If one term falls, the other two become tenuous as well. To challenge Nguyen’s account of the art-status of games, one would have three potential targets. In this essay, I pose some questions to Nguyen about each. Here is a quick outline. In §2, I review the theory of art in which Nguyen’s account is situated—the cluster theory of art. This theory has enjoyed some recent popularity, but it does have its drawbacks. I worry that Nguyen’s appeal to the cluster theory is unable to avoid one of its key drawbacks—that the cluster of art-making properties is selected by an inherently circular process. In §3, I examine Nguyen’s claim that the experiences games produce are aesthetic experiences. While ‘aesthetic experience’ is notoriously difficult to define, philosophical debates have focused on a class of experiences identified by David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Nguyen’s view of aesthetic experience breaks with the historical view in an important way. I ask whether a broad account of aesthetic experience can be given, one that unites the traditional account with Nguyen’s. Then, in §4, I examine Nguyen’s claim that agency is the medium of games. I suggest that we cannot identify the medium of some object until we can independently claim that the object is a work of art. On its own merits, each of Nguyen’s three interrelated terms is shaky and in need of further support.

**2 Art**

Philosophical debate over the concept *art* has long struggled with the issue of art’s diversity. For any set of necessary and sufficient conditions that one can advance for membership in the domain of art, counter-examples abound. Artists seem to take particular delight in devising works of art that explicitly contradict philosophical definitions of art. In recent years, many philosophers have sought to move beyond the traditional ‘what is art’ debate.

We can see in the literature two kinds of projects concerning the domain of art. Some theorists continue to debate various definitions of art—call these *definitional projects*—while other theorists attempt to argue that specific practices should be included among the arts—call these *extending projects*. Nguyen’s project is clearly an extending one. Nguyen does not explicitly defend a formal definition of art—that is not his project. Nonetheless, Nguyen notes his adherence to the cluster theory (123-4). So, what is the ‘cluster theory’?

One growing approach to the definitional project has been to attempt a pluralist definition of art.[[2]](#footnote-2) Broadly, pluralist definitions of art hold that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for art. Instead, pluralists suggest that there are a number of non-essential art-making properties, and the possession of some such properties is sufficient for art-status. The ensuing debate among pluralists concerns what those art-making properties are and just how many art-making properties must an object possess to attain art-status. For instance, consider Berys Gaut’s ‘cluster account’ of art (Gaut 2000, 2005). According to Gaut, there are ten art-making properties: (1) possessing positive aesthetic qualities, (2) expressing emotion, (3) being intellectually challenging, (4) exhibiting formal complexity and coherence, (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings, (6) exhibiting an individual point of view, (7) being an exercise of creative imagination, (8) being a product of a high degree of skill, (9) belonging to an established art form, and (10) having been created with the intention to be a work of art (Gaut 2000, 28). Objects that possess all ten properties would undoubtedly count as works of art; objects that possess none of these properties would undoubtedly fail to be works of art; and objects that possess some of these properties, but not all, would count as ‘borderline’ cases of art. Gaut further argues that it is a virtue of the cluster account that it recognises the possibility of borderline cases (2005, 279-281). Consider cooking, which is Gaut’s example. The tacos from my local shop satisfy some of Gaut’s conditions—particularly, (1), (4), and (8)—but they certainly don’t satisfy others—like (2), (3), and (5). (I am on the fence about (6), (7), (9), and (10).) The suggestion that the tacos from my local shop are works of art is a coherent one, though it is also not an assured one. As Gaut says, ‘In thinking about whether cookery is an art, these seem to be just the sort of factors we take into account: we are pulled towards saying that it is an art by virtue of the first three criteria, but feel resistance by virtue of the latter three’ (2005, 280). The cluster account is able to accommodate these instances where one feels conflicted about whether or not *x* is a work of art because the theory is neatly able to acknowledge borderline cases.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Cluster theories capture some intuitions about art, but they also suffer from a common problem: why should we think the set of properties that Gaut (or any cluster theorist) has identified is the relevant art-making set of properties?[[4]](#footnote-4) To defend one set of properties over some other set, we need an argument explaining what makes someproperties—but not other properties—the art-making properties. But, if we had an argument explaining why some properties are art-making properties, then surely we would indirectly have an argument for what makes something art. One strategy that some cluster theorists pursue is to stipulate that the art-making properties that belong in the cluster are those typically associated with paradigmatic examples of art.[[5]](#footnote-5) But, this strategy is inherently circular. How do we select which works of art get to serve as our paradigmatic examples? And can we be so sure that our paradigmatic examples are really free from cultural bias and prejudice?

Nguyen does not mount a detailed defense of a cluster theory for games as the definitional project is not his primary concern—he is pursuing an extending project. Yet, Nguyen says:

I take the term *art* to be best explained by a cluster theory. Thus there are no good necessary and sufficient conditions for being ‘art,’ but only a loose set of family resemblances. One traditionally significant member of that cluster is the class of artworks that are made for the sake of aesthetic experiences. And games are often made for the sake of such experiences, and resemble traditional forms of art in other significant ways as well, so they plausibly belong in that cluster (Nguyen 2020, 123).

So, the general strategy of Nguyen’s extending project is that, if *x* is a work of art partly because it affords users with aesthetic experiences, then other objects that afford users aesthetic experiences have some claim to being art as well.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Recall, one problem with the cluster theory is that we need some explanation of why any theorists’ proposed cluster of art-making properties is *the* set of art-making properties. This macro problem can be spelled out on a micro-level: for any given property in the proposed cluster, what makes that property an art-making property? Nguyen relies on the idea that *producing aesthetic experiences* is a relevant art-making property because it is ‘traditionally significant’. But notice, to make this claim, one must already have in mind some artistic tradition, one that affords aesthetic experience a central role in the arts. Why must we assume that tradition? Why does that tradition, and its associated values, get to serve as the paradigm?

**3 Aesthetics**

Games are works of art because they are designed to offer players aesthetic experiences. But, is the player’s experience of a game really an *aesthetic* experience at all? And, what sort of experiences are aesthetic ones? This question should matter to us because, if the art-status of games hinges on their producing ‘aesthetic experiences’, then we need to know which experiences count. This is an issue that Nguyen takes up in Chapter 5. Before turning to Nguyen’s account, it is worth considering both some methodological and some historical background to the question.

First, what are we asking about when we seek to analyze ‘aesthetic experience’? I suggest that we are interested in explaining a particular and distinctive class of experiences. The sort of experiences that many philosophers historically have focused on are those that exhibit three characteristics: they are (1) subjective experiences (2) that represent external objects as possessing certain properties (3) that are described by employing either thickly or thinly evaluative terms.[[7]](#footnote-7) These three characteristics pick out an interesting set of experiences that have long been at the center of debates in philosophical aesthetics. By focusing on experiences that satisfy the three characteristics above, numerous interesting philosophical questions arise. They are subjective experiences, but how uniform are these experiences across different subjects? They represent objects as possessing certain properties, but are those properties really located *out there* in the object of our experience or are these properties just a product of our experience? They are described in evaluative terms, but is their valence part of those properties or again just a part of our representation of them?

Philosophical interest in these sorts of experiences comes to us from a tradition following Hume and Kant. For these philosophers, ‘aesthetic experiences’ were subjective experiences that played a central role in determining certain qualities of objects. Hume (1757/1993) was interested in how standards of aesthetic evaluation could be determined through experience, while Kant (1790/1953) was interested in how aesthetic judgments based on experience could be intersubjectively valid. So, we could refer to these experiences as the Humean-Kantian aesthetic tradition.

It is central to this tradition that the qualities that one experiences are qualities that are attributed to the objects of one’s experience. Aesthetic experiences are *external-directed*, which is captured by (2) above. Of course, it may turn out, after philosophical investigation, that these qualities are merely properties of our conscious experiences and not properties of external objects themselves. But an important part of the Humean-Kantian tradition is that aesthetic qualities *appear in subjective experience* to be qualities of external objects. In looking at a painting, I see its balance as being a property of the composition; and in listening to a musical performance, I hear melancholy as being a property of the music. Both Hume and Kant ultimately argue that aesthetic qualities are not properties of objects, but the point here is that Hume and Kant—and the philosophical tradition that follows after them—takes the external-directed nature of aesthetic experiences to be worthy of investigation. One can see the continued focus on external-directed aesthetic experiences in many analytic philosophers—like Beardsley (1981), Iseminger (2004), Levinson (2016), Schellekens (2006), and Zangwill (2001). The Humean-Kantian conception picks out a fascinating class of evaluatively loaded experiences that have been central to aesthetics for a long time.

The experiences of the Humean-Kantian tradition are not restricted to the domain of art. Yuriko Saito (2007) argues that everyday experiences—like enjoying a cup of tea, or a view of the flower garden, or even the ambiance of a space—can be places where one finds aesthetic qualities too. By expanding the notion of ‘the aesthetic’ to everyday objects and events, we may rightly acknowledge the ubiquity of aesthetic experience. Saito’s account has (rightly) been highly influential in recent years. However, notice that Saito’s notion of everyday aesthetics does not radically break with the Humean-Kantian tradition. The experiences that Saito describes still satisfy the three conditions picked out above. Of particular attention here is the external-directed nature of everyday aesthetics. Everyday aesthetic experiences represent the qualities that one finds as being located in external objects. Enjoying of a cup of tea locates the enjoyable quality *in* the tea. This point holds even in Saito’s example of the aesthetic enjoyment of the ambiance of a space. The tranquility of a garden is experienced as a property *of* the garden.

In some respects, Nguyen’s account of the aesthetics of games goes along with some of the central commitments of the Humean-Kantian tradition; though, in other respects, Nguyen breaks with that tradition. Consider Nguyen’s account of ‘layered attention’. When the player is focused on their game play, their attitude is absorbed by the task at hand. The player is interested in playing well, which demands that the player take a motivated and calculating attitude toward the game. This first-order level of attention is clearly *interested*. However, Nguyen argues that one can also pay attention to the quality of one’s own gameplaying experience. At this second-order level, players can take pleasure in their own absorption in the actions and challenges presented by the game. It is at this level of attention that experience is *disinterested*, and therefore conforms to one of Kant’s central claims about the nature of aesthetic experience (117).

This defense of the disinterested nature of the player’s second-order experience of a game lines up nicely with the traditional view. However, Nguyen claims that the aesthetic qualities one attributes to gameplay is not directed at any external object. One does not experience the game itself as having qualities of agency. It is, instead, attributed to the player’s own subjective experience, which breaks with (2) above. As Nguyen says, ‘[w]hen I make aesthetic judgments in response to a game, I am ascribing aesthetic properties and qualities to my own processes—to the actions and activities that I perform in response to the game… [A]esthetic qualities … arise in the act of analyzing, deciding, seeing, responding, and doing’ (107). Nguyen’s shift away from external-directed judgments to internal-directed judgments is striking, which Nguyen acknowledges.

So, are these *aesthetic* experiences? Undoubtably, the experiences that Nguyen describes have a distinctive phenomenology; and one can find value (both positive and negative) in their phenomenology. But, is their value laden phenomenology enough to class such experiences as aesthetic? Headaches have a distinctive phenomenology and are also laden with (negative) value, but we wouldn’t thereby want to class headaches as ‘aesthetic experiences’. If the experiences Nguyen describes are aesthetic experiences, then they are a different kind from the familiar Humean-Kantian experiences. Aestheticians have long taken an interest in art because of its reliable ability to produce experiences of the Humean-Kantian kind. Here is my main worry: if ‘works of art’ are objects that produce experiences of the Humean-Kantian kind (from Nguyen’s appeal to the cluster theory), and games do not produce such experiences, then we cannot appeal to the ‘aesthetic experience’ of games to defend their art-status. In response, Nguyen might argue that both internal-directed and external-directed experiences are two different species of ‘the aesthetic’. That may be true. But, in that case, we are owed some bridging argument that unites both kinds of experiences under ‘the aesthetic’.

**4 The Medium[[8]](#footnote-8)**

Can agency be an artistic medium? This question is worth pursuing because of the strong intuitive link between an object’s art-status and its possession of an artistic medium: to claim that *x* has a medium lends some weight to the claim that *x* is art. To be clear, Nguyen does not make the argument that games are art *because* they possess an artistic medium. Nonetheless, *art*, *aesthetics*, and *the medium* are terms that come together in Nguyen’s account such that the status of one supports the status of the others. So, we need to know, first, what is the relationship between *art* and *the medium*; second, how do we identify artistic media; and third, whether agency satisfies the conditions for being an artistic medium. While my account here will be speculative, I will argue that Nguyen’s account doesn’t yet allow us to identify agency as a medium.

The most natural starting point to think about artistic media is to look at the physical material of some work. As Noel Carroll asks, ‘[a]ren’t media, in the most clear-cut sense, physical…?’ (Carroll 2003: 3). Some of the traditional artistic media are things like oil paint, watercolours, marble, and bronze. But, as many philosophers have noted, we cannot simply identify the medium as a work’s physical materials, for two reasons. First, two works of art may make use of the same physical materials and yet use those materials in importantly different ways, which suggests that we should think of them as employing two distinct media. Drawing and printmaking make use of inks and paper, yet the difference in how these materials are applied makes them distinct artistic media. Second, two works of art may make use of very different kinds of physical materials and yet may use those materials in importantly similar ways, which suggests that, when other conditions are met, they are two works in the same medium. For instance, audio recordings can be made using many different kinds of physical materials—magnetic tape, digital technologies, or old-fashioned wax cylinders—each of which having different properties and challenges. Toward the end of the 20th century, the audio recording industry has largely shifted from analog recording to digital recording; however, this industry-wide shift in recording materials has not altered the fundamental practices of sound engineering.

So, many philosophers today distinguish between the *material* and the *medium* by observing that materials used in the service of art are always accompanied by social conventions and expectations for their use (e.g. D. Davies 2004, Lopes 2014, Margolis 1984, Wollheim 1987). For instance, the medium of painting is not merely pigment applied to a flat surface, but is also the set of conventions that govern what artists may do with those pigments and how audiences should scrutinise such works. We could call this the *social-ontological theory* of media: the ontology of an artistic medium is defined, not only by its physical material, but also by the socially sanctioned uses and evaluative standards associated with those materials. Nguyen clearly adopts a social-ontological view of artistic media. Quoting Lopes (2014), Nguyen says, ‘an artistic medium is not merely a certain set of materials, but a set of “technical resources”’ (14).

Nguyen does not seek to answer the question, *what makes anything an artistic medium*. Instead, Nguyen’s main aim is to identify what the medium of games could be. Nguyen addresses this question early on. The challenge to identify the medium of games must grapple with the diversity of the many different things that fall under the category of Suitsian games—such diverse things as board games, card games, sports, video games, and drinking games. The answer for Nguyen is *agency*:

The common artistic medium of striving games—the technical resources by which the game designer sculpts practical experience—are the goals, the rules, and the environment that these various parts animate into a system of constraints. The game designer crafts for players a very particular form of struggle, and does so by crafting both a temporary practical agency for us to inhabit and a practical environment for us to struggle against. In other words, the medium of the game designer is agency. (17)

As stated previously, there is an intuitive link between *art* and *medium*; but, how strong is that link? Here is one (admittedly contestable) suggestion: *medium* is a distinctive feature of *art* such that works of art have a medium, while non-art objects do not. If that suggestion sounds too strong, then try this one: considerations about the medium are a relevant factor in the evaluation of works of art *qua* art, but they are not relevant considerations in the evaluation of non-art objects *qua* whatever their non-art category may be. Medium-talk has a purpose in aesthetic and artistic evaluation, which is to consider the specific way in which some object was made and to consider how it could have been different. By contrast, it is (typically) irrelevant to talk about the medium of non-art objects. Consider some examples. Drawings can be rendered in pencil on paper, but so too can maps. Suppose I draw for you a map of my university’s campus, giving you directions to my office. It would be odd (or maybe humorous, fanciful, ostentatious, or even rude) if you evaluated my map *qua map* based on my handling of the medium. Shoes can be made out of many different materials—like leather, canvas, plastics, and wood. There are important differences between these materials. Some materials are better suited than others for particular kinds of shoes. Yet, when we evaluate a pair of shoes, we tend to talk about their materials, not their medium. Some photographs—like those of Man Ray—are works of art while other photographs—like the picture of me in my passport—are not. It would be odd to consider the photographer’s command of the medium when speaking of my passport photo *qua form of identification*. For things that are works of art, it is relevant to our aesthetic and artistic evaluation of them to turn our attention to their medium; for things that are not works of art, there is no medium, there are only materials. Now, what about games? If what I have suggested above is right, then I worry that medium-talk would become relevant to our appreciation of games only once we recognise games as a work of art. So, that means that we would need to be convinced of the art-status of games prior to, and independently from, the medium-status of agency.

**5 Conclusion**

In the end, are games art? Are internal-directed experiences ‘aesthetic’? Is agency a medium? Each of these terms hangs on the other. Nguyen’s appeal to the cluster theory relies heavily on its acceptance of aesthetic experience as one of the art-making properties (§2); but the experiences Nguyen identifies are importantly different from the sort of ‘aesthetic experiences’ that have long been associated with art (§3); and the medium-status of agency ultimately hangs on how we resolve both of the previous two questions (§4). We cannot defend the art-status of games, or the aesthetic-status of internal-directed experiences, or the medium-status of agency without finding some further argument that breaks the circle.

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1. In Bartel and Kwong (forthcoming), we sketch these issues out a bit further and argue in defense of ‘art eliminativism’: there can be no non-arbitrary way of defining ‘art’. Instead, we should focus attention on the various ways in which cultural objects can be valued while recognizing that no single way-of-value is central or essential. The arguments presented here will not rely on our defense of art eliminativism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For other recent pluralist accounts of art, see Lopes (2014) and Mag Uidhir and Magnus (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For other cluster accounts, see S. Davies (2004) and Dutton (2006). Tavinor (2009) similarly endorses a cluster account in defense of art-status of video games. For criticism of Gaut’s account, see Adajian (2003), Meskin (2007), and Monseré (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adajian (2003) and Meskin (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Dutton (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nguyen’s claim here is a bit stronger than Gaut’s theory would allow. Nguyen offers only one art-making property for games—aesthetic experience, which is (1) on Gaut’s list. On Gaut’s view, then, possessing only one art-making property makes games a borderline case at best. Nonetheless, it is still plausible that games are art. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an introduction and discussion of the distinction between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ terms, see Roberts (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Part of the argument I offer in this section was first developed in Bartel (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)