Defending *Games*: Reply to Hurka, Kukla, and Noë

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(This is a pre-print of my reply to commentators, from the *Analysis* symposium on my book, *Games: Agency as Art.* The symposium featured commentary by Thomas Hurka, Quill Kukla, and Alva Noe. The complete symposium appears here: https://academic.oup.com/analysis/issue/81/2)

I'd like to thank my interlocutors for their time and generous efforts. This group of commentators were originally scheduled as a live Author Meets Critics session at the 2020 Pacific APA conference, which was cancelled in the COVID pandemic. I am so glad to have a second chance at this exchange.

Sadly, I do not have the space to address all the points raised. I've chosen to discuss in detail a handful of criticisms — the ones which seemed to lead to the most interesting exchanges. Unless otherwise specified, all page numbers refer to *Games: Agency as Art* (2020).

I. HURKA ON ACHIEVEMENT

Hurka and I share a basic framework for thinking about games: Bernard Suits' account of games as the voluntary attempt to overcome obstacles. Notably, Suits did not attempt to offer a unified account of the value of games. Suits is a pluralist about the value of games, as am I. In fact, I believe the main idea in my book falls out of Suits' analysis. That is, that what is distinctive about games is not some specific *value*, but the *location* of that value. The value of game-playing must have some special relationship to the struggle against obstacles – whether that value lie in achievements, aesthetic experiences, education, or fitness (30-3).

Hurka's (2006) paper, "Games and the Good" also uses Suits' account, but tacks away from a pluralism about value. Hurka argues that the primary good of games lies specifically in the value of achievement — where the value of an achievement correlates with its difficulty. The harder the game, the better the win. Hurka's achievement-centric view serves as a major opponent in *Games: Agency as Art*. I argue that achievement value cannot, by itself, explain many of the features in the rich and varied practices of game play. For me, aesthetic value is at least as important. Hurka's picture is

one where the value is primarily in the *excellence of overcoming* the difficulty, and my picture is one where the value often lies heavily in *the aesthetic quality of the experience of struggling* to overcome difficulties.

In responding to my discussion, Hurka has given up a little ground. He is now willing to grant that aesthetics can explain a little bit of the value story. But he still thinks that achievement value is the dominant value — and that I vastly overrate the importance of the aesthetic value of games. But I think Hurka vastly underrates the centrality of aesthetics to many gaming communities, designers, and players.

One of Hurka's key arguments is that games have far less aesthetic value than the traditional arts. So why would people ever play games instead of looking at paintings or reading novels? The answer, says Hurka, must lie in the achievement value of game-playing, which makes up the difference in value.

I want to deny the presuppositions of this argument on two fronts. First, it is unclear why one might think that the appreciation of the traditional arts is any less difficult than playing games. Dealing with the obscurities in Emily Dickinson's poetry, or coming to see the subtle brushwork in Han Gan's ink paintings, is surely also difficult.

More importantly, I want to deny that games have *essentially* less aesthetic value than the traditional arts. I grant that many people believe that games have low aesthetic value, but that belief can be explained in several ways. The first is prosaic: many people have simply not played many aesthetically rich games. There are, in fact, many terrible games. But, as Sturgeon's Law says, 90% of everything is crap. (This was science-fiction author Theodore Sturgeon's response to the observation that most science fiction was terrible. Most sci-fi is terrible, he granted, but so too are most novels, movies, and paintings.) In any domain, you have to spend some time to find the good stuff. If you already think a form has low aesthetic value, then you won't spend much time and energy searching for the really good stuff, and so are quite unlikely to find it. So, prophecy self-fulfilled.[1] This is especially true in a relatively new (or historically excluded) forms of art, in which there are fewer guides and canons in the established institutions of cultural curation.

And, even when we encounter aesthetically rich games, we may miss out on their key valuable aesthetic qualities — or underrate them — because we are looking in the wrong places. One of the central purposes of my book was to show that games are capable of their own very particular form of aesthetic value, quite distinct from the forms of aesthetic value we find in the traditional arts. When we try to force-fit games into the framework of the traditional arts – when we look only in the places that traditional theories of art have taught us to look –

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1 I offer an extended discussion of the interplay between trust, expected value, and effort in discovering new arts in (Nguyen, 2021).

we will miss much of the special aesthetic value that games have to offer.

It will be helpful to briefly sketch my account of the object arts and process arts. Most traditional arts are *object arts*. In the object arts, aesthetic qualities are fixed into an object — like a painting or a dance performance — by the artist or artists. Games, on the other hand, are a *process art*. The core aesthetic qualities emerge in the player, during their participation in the game.2 Many game designers' efforts are bent towards sculpting and calling forth aesthetically rich actions in the players. But if we force games into an aesthetic paradigm built around the object arts, then we will likely miss this other mode of aesthetic value. In the object arts, we should look to the designed object. But in the process arts, we should look to ourselves. The beauty, grace, and thrill emerge in our own actions. If we presume that the primary aesthetic qualities must lie in the designed object — the game — then we can easily miss out on this other bounty of aesthetic qualities on offer.

The basic nature of process aesthetic qualities is also deeply different. In the object arts, the artist can fix the aesthetic details for us. In games, the artist must work *through* the freedom and agency of the audience, to evoke those aesthetic qualities in the player's own actions (149-53). This means that the aesthetic qualities that arise may be less finely sculpted by the artist, but they are ones that arise in us. We, the players, have a hand in their creation. To put it crudely: the movements in my body during a game of basketball may not be as finely wrought as in a Martha Graham performance, but they are my movements. The difference lies not in the bare fact that they are mine. My entire experience of them is different. My experience of these movements is of things that I decided on, invented, and which sprung out of my own abilities. I can have aesthetic experiences of myself in the throes of analysis, invention and action. The aesthetic experiences, then, are of very different types. In the object arts, I experience an aesthetic quality created by another. In the process arts, I can have aesthetic experiences of my own actions. The aesthetic qualities of first-personal agency are the special province of the process arts. In that case, we need no explanation for why we should be aesthetically interested both in the traditional arts and in games. Each offers access to a different type of aesthetic quality, and so a different type of aesthetic value. If all this is right, then we have a response – and a diagnosis – to Hurka's discussion. It turns out that games aren't less aesthetically valuable than the traditional arts. It only appears so, to some, because they are too in the grips of an aesthetic theory built to suit the object arts.

However, Hurka raises a number of worries about my emphasis on the value of

2 An early version of the process arts was offered in (141-9). I have since significantly developed the story in (Nguyen, 2020b).

process aesthetics. First, he worries that we have little reason to think that the process of making something beautiful will, itself, also be beautiful. A star soccer player's kick might look rapturously beautiful to spectators – but to the player themselves, it might feel quite ugly. Second, Hurka worries that my account of process aesthetics is far too promiscuous. If I am interested in a harmony of capacity between abilities and demands, then we will find this, not just in the expert player, but in the novice too. In fact, the novice might experience this harmony more often than the expert player — which, says Hurka, fails to track our intuitions about the greater aesthetic value of expert play. And finally, he worries that such aesthetic experiences will sometimes be hard to find, especially for the experts. The actions of great athletes are often automatic and unconscious. Thus, though their movements are superbly beautiful to the outside eye, they themselves may have little experience of that beauty.

All these criticisms, however, are founded on one shared assumption: that there should be some sort of continuity between the aesthetic value that a spectator finds in watching a gaming action, and the aesthetic value that the player finds in performing that action. But there's no reason to accept this assumption. Instead, it seems far more plausible that, with games, the *observer's evaluation* and the *player's evaluation* can sharply differ. I grant: some actions, which are beautiful and impressively skilled to the outside observer, have no aesthetic quality at all for the expert, for whom they are automatic. I also grant: novices may have aesthetic experiences aplenty of their experiences of struggling with tasks which are, to the expert, no problem at all. Here is a bullet I am wiling to bite: in this case, *the novice is having a more valuable inner aesthetic experience than the expert*, even if spectators would prefer to watch the expert's performance. This, I think, is one of the most significant differences between the process arts, and the more familiar performances arts. In games and other process arts, novices can have worthwhile aesthetic experiences of their own struggles, even if those struggles would be of little interest to most observers.

Think about the market for video-games. If you're out to watch other players for the beauty of their actions, you'll likely seek out the most expert players to watch. Most folks, who buy and play the game, are a far cry from ultra-skilled experts. Most of us aren't *Starcraft 2* e-sports pros. Most of us just stumble along, figuring out how to play a game as we make their first and only run through its plotline. No one will watch us; our performances will be mostly pretty boring to any external spectators. But why do players like us play, then?

The best way to understand the value that everyday players take in their activity is to detach internal aesthetic value from observer aesthetic value. The assumption of aesthetic continuity comes, I think, from over-privileging the role of the outside observer. That is, I suspect, a holdover from the value paradigm of the object arts. Once

we accept that fact that some arts are made for the internal experience of action, then we won't demand that internal process aesthetics must align with outside observer aesthetics.3

On to the next major argument. Hurka notes that the aesthetic value of games is closely tied to their difficulty. Thus, insofar as the aesthetic value of game-playing correlates to the difficulty value, it's going to be hard to tell whether, when we value a bit of game-playing, we're valuing the achievement or the aesthetics. So: why strain for this odd aesthetic theory when we already have a perfectly serviceable account of the value of games, in terms of achievements?

First, a clarification: Hurka attributes to me the view that struggles are aesthetically valuable only if they are difficult. This is not actually my view. I think that some aesthetic qualities are tied to difficulty, but other qualities are tied to ease. There is one aesthetic glory involved in finally overcoming that brutal, tormenting puzzle, and another kind of grace that comes from effortlessly surmounting challenges (108). On the other hand, there is also an aesthetics of comedy on our abject failures to perform simple tasks — as we find in drinking games and other stupid games (112-4). The practice of party games, in fact, involves intentionally focusing on skills that most players are very unlikely to have developed, so that players can experience comic ineptness and failure in a low-stakes environment (133-4).

But, I am happy to grant, some key aesthetic qualities in games are closely linked with difficulty. There's a particular savor to overcoming a very hard game or beating a really tough opponent. We need to difficult games to access those particular aesthetic goods. In my account, it's because difficult actions offer us an experience of the *harmony of capacity*. It is not just that our solutions fit the problem, but that those solutions arise from our abilities stretched to their maximum. Our whole practical self, at its maximum capacity, is just barely capable of doing it. When we succeed at a difficult game, we get to experience a rare moment of harmony between practical self and the practical demands of the world (107-12). There is also an aesthetic experience of growth — of feeling one's capacities grow to meet the challenge. Among other things, it offers us an experience of a dramatic arc, emerging within our own agency, from ineptitude to just barely doing it, and then finally breezing right through.

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3 One more small exchange on aesthetics: Hurka worries that when we are absorbed in practical activity, aesthetic experiences will only be available in memory - which, he thinks, is a thin medium for conducting aesthetic experiences. But notice that memory is always required to experience the large-scale structure of any time-extended work of art. The value of a symphony or a movie is not just in the aggregation of a bunch of valuable aesthetic moments. Much of the value resides in the relationships in the whole large structure – and that can only be brought into view through memory.

The crux of the matter, then, is *why* we're engaging with that difficulty. If Hurka is right, then it is the achievement of overcoming difficulty itself which is valuable; the aesthetic stuff just the occasional sprinkle on top. If I'm right, then often, the close tie between difficulty and aesthetics lies in the fact that there is valuable aesthetic experience that arises only, or especially, in engagements with difficulty.[4]

Here's one a first worry for the Hurkian view: if we are playing games for the achievement of it, then why would we play games which we probably can't win? Shouldn't aim at difficult games that we can win, rather than risk spending time on a difficult game that might we might never vanquish? But many people play games which they are unlikely to win. For example, ultra-hard games like *Dark Souls* and *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* are much-beloved — even when the majority of players cannot finish the game. Hurka has a straightforward response here: you don't have to win the whole game for it to count as an achievement. Making some progress is an achievement; improving your skills is an achievement.

Let's try a slightly different tack. If the point of games is to be good at difficult things, then what explains why we sometimes choose games that we're bad at? And why would we set aside games that we're good at, to try a new game that we're not yet good at?

Here's a secret: as much as I talk about rock climbing in the book, I'm terrible at it. For all the years of effort I've put into it, I'm scarcely past a late-novice stage. The problem is that I'm a lackluster athlete. I'm far better at intellectual games. Given my relative talents, then, my achievements would be far greater if I threw myself, not into such physical games, but into mental games. But I climb because there I find the elegance of climbing totally absorbing; because I am wild for the particular form of athletic grace it calls out in me. But, once again, Hurka has a response: perhaps there is some special achievement value in doing what is hard for you. Perhaps difficulty is relatively scaled, and it is more of an achievement to middlingly well at something I am bad at, then to do something well when I am better at it. (Gwen Bradford [2015, 36-63] rejects this agent-relative view of achievements, but let's leave that aside for the moment).

Our views might now start to seem functionally equivalent. Is there really any air between them? I think the two views are actually quite different. If Hurka is right, then difficulty *by itself* will be sufficient to render a playing of a game valuable. All games of equal difficulty will be largely equal in value (plus or minus a bit of aesthetic sprinkle). But if I'm right, then there will plenty of cases where playing a game in-

4 What follows is a complexified variation of a discussion from the book (40-4).

volves difficulty, but yet still the experience is wholly unsatisfying and largely valueless. In order words, if a person is interested in the aesthetics of difficulty, then difficulty itself will be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of value. There will be beautiful difficulties and tedious ones.5

We now have a better response to Hurka. To the extent that his view is achievement-centric, Hurka can't account for strongly differing evaluations of games of approximately equal difficulty. He has particular difficulty explaining why players might ever value playing a game of lower difficulty over a game of higher difficulty. But game-players express passionate preferences precisely along these lines. This hard game is tedious, this other easier one fascinating. For many game-players, finding aesthetic value is more valuable than finding difficulty.

Most rock-climbing guidebooks have two ratings for each climb: a difficulty rating and a quality rating. In bouldering, boulder problems are rated for their difficult by the V-scale: V0 is for beginners; V16 is something a handful of peak, world-class climbers in the world can do. Boulder problems are also rated for their quality, usually from zero to four stars. The quality ratings concern the aesthetic quality of the climb: how interesting and elegant the movement is, how those movements harmonize with the visual aspects of the rock.

Importantly, the scales are entirely independent. There are plenty of four-star easy climbs and plenty of zero-star hard climbs. And many climbers visiting a distant climbing area will often spend their time seeking out the high-star, rather than just doing hardest ones they can. They are seeking aesthetic quality, elegance, and interestingness, over brute difficulty.

This gap is particularly clear in the richly aesthetic language of contemporary game criticism. J.C. Lawrence, a.k.a. clearclaw, is one of my favorite boardgame critics. Here are his reviews of two games from the 18xx family — which are exhaustingly, absurdly difficult, multi-hour games. They simulate being a robber baron in the era of rail, investing in and temporarily controlling various train companies, while swapping stocks and control in those companies with one's fellow players, trying to manipulate the stock market all the while.

Here's his review of *1860*:

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5 I take my argument here to be in elaborated version of an old refrain. Hurka's original "Games and the Good" was originally published with a response from John Tasioulas (2006). In that response, Tasioulas argued that, if Hurka is right, then we should play all sorts of very difficult, but miserably boring games — like, say, counting all the blades of grass on a lawn. An achievement-centric view has trouble explaining what's missing from the dedicated grass-counter.

> Original, engrossing, wonderfully fluid and facile stock market, multiple waves of difficult to master and yet critical timings and trade-offs. Delicious… Feels like startups in Silicon Valley in the 1990s: most die and fail badly. It really is a tough fight just to survive… As far as I've been able to tell, the core is timing the rotation of companies into and out receivership and thereby manipulating the end-game lineup when nationalisation hits. There are very delightfully nasty things that can be done in that space… *1862* is a brilliant game, my favourite of the 18xx. Unstable, prone to great drama, screaming run-away winners, amazing hail-mary come-from-behind wins, jaw-droppingly clever coordinated move sequences, and more volatility and dynamism than you can shake a stick at.

He rates it a 9.5 out of 10. On the other hand, here's his review of *18CZ*, which is approximately as difficult:

> Can you do the matrix evaluation of revenues over density over time vs trains? Sure, like *1835* this is a game of small margins and finessed predictions, but unlike *1835* there's little/no other texture, leaving only the density questions and an oppressive cost to pay for the benefit of having that question.

He rates it a 3.5 out of 10.[6]

Game appreciators speak in such obviously aesthetic terms — and game designers are guided by such aesthetic terms. Appreciators can praise one game to the stars, and condemn as tedious another game of equal (or greater) difficulty. All that differential valuing cannot be understood strictly, or primarily, in terms of achievement value.

II. KUKLA ON NARROWNESS (AND IKEA)

Quill Kukla offers several criticisms, which offer variations on a central theme: that my theory of games is too narrow.

One criticism is that my account of game aesthetics is too abstract — that I am interested only in the aesthetics of mental abstractions, and not in the material experience of gaming. I don't think that this accurately represents my view. Some experiences of game-playing I describe are extremely abstract, but others are profoundly material. Some of the satisfactions of rock climbing are in how my body feels to move with such precision, in how the rock presses like razors into my fingers (102; Nguyen 2017).

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6 Those reviews, and a bounty of others, can all be found at clearclaw's boardgamegeek profile page: https://www.boardgamegeek.com/user/clearclaw

Kukla writes:

> Nguyen argues that the materiality of the game environment recedes from view in paradigmatic immersed game play; our aesthetic attention is only focused on the pure form of our striving agency. This is so even when the challenge of the game is an inherently material one: "When I am fully engaged in a difficult rock climb, I am wholly focused on overcoming the challenges. I don't pay much attention to the lovely shade of green on the rock, or how the granite smells" (119). Even stronger, he argues that to the extent we focus on the material environment, our experience is not aesthetic: "My whole consciousness is lost in complete devotion to this one problem… My first order perception of the rock is practical and focused, and *therefore not aesthetic*" (120, [Kukla's] emphasis).

But my claim is not that my experience of rock climbing ignores the material plane entirely. It is that my experience of the material plane *is practically focused*. My attention is focused on those material features that matter to my climbing attempt, and my perception of them is conditioned by that struggle. This is clearer if I can restore some of the context to the text that Kukla has quoted. Here's the quoted bit from my text, but with the next sentence restored:

> When I am fully engaged in a difficult rock climb, I am wholly focused on overcoming the challenges. I don't pay much attention to the lovely shade of green on the rock, or how the granite smells. I am largely focused on what matters to the practical task — where the holds are, how slippery the feet are, how the rock is textured. (119).

What's at issue here is not the material vs. immaterial, but the way one's awareness of the world transforms during the absorption in a practical task. Some material elements fall away; others loom brightly, transformed by their relationship to a goal. The deep mountain crevasse may be beautiful to a distant landscape painter, but to the mountain climber, its features are ominous and threatening. A mountain climber experiences a deep crevasse *as an obstacle* (34-5).

More importantly: I am not claiming that this kind of hyper-focus is characteristic of *all* game aesthetics. This description is of my own phenomenology in rock climbing. I take it to be representative of one very specific kind of game-play, and one specific kind of player — the kind interested in intense practical absorption. This is certainly not the only way to play a game. Many social games are played in a relaxed way, without such sharp practical absorption or such deep perceptual transformation.

Maybe some context will help. This particular passage comes up as deep into a conversation with a very specific interlocutor, who holds the view that all aesthetic experiences must necessarily be disinterested. At this particular moment, I've granted this disinterestedness view for the sake of argument, and then taken on the

aesthetics of total practical absorption as the toughest case for me to explain, given that assumption (118). I'm trying to show how you could, nevertheless, still have aesthetic experiences of practical absorption – that the disinterestedness view is still compatible with an aesthetics of practical absorption. My solution is to suggest that, even if we accept that first-order perceptions are wholly practical and absorbed, we can still have room for impractical and aesthetic second-order reflections on those first-order perceptions. My point here is not that all game play and game aesthetics must be absorbed like this. The point is to show that *even when* our experiences become hyper-focused and narrowed on practical matters, and *even if* we accept a disinterest theory of aesthetics, we can still have second-order disinterested aesthetic experiences of our first-order interested activity (114-20). I am trying to block here an argument that practical aesthetics are essentially self-contradictory; I am merely trying to show that aesthetic experiences of absorbed practicality are possible, not that they are universal.

Second: Kukla suggests that I demand an unrealistic amount of purity — that I demand that game-playing involve a complete moral separation, where we suspend moral consideration, ignore the other person's moral being entirely, and throw ourselves into their destruction. Some people, says Kukla, may play in this unusually pure way, but others may not. Kukla's deeper worry is that an excessively pure conception of play will lead to game-playing actions that are insensitive to the moral and social complexities of play.

Writes Kukla:

> Perhaps Nguyen, idiosyncratically, tends to play games with specific people who are particularly pure in their play, but I really don't think this is the norm. People play games for all sorts of messy reasons and these come with moral complications. It is a dick move to just play so as to maximize the win without sensitivity to the complex reasons why people are playing, and why they are playing as they are.

And I mostly agree! People absolutely do play games for all sorts of reasons, and it would, indeed be a real dick move to just *assume* that everybody else was in it for a purely competitive experience. Such behavior would show total insensitivity to the variability of people's interests, and the vast plurality of varying motivations for gaming. But I am not suggesting any such thing. When I describe the complete absorption in the practical state, and the complete devotion to the destruction of the in-game opponent, I am not claiming that this is an essential feature of any and all game-playing. I am describing a specific form of play which *some players* experience and seek.

In fact, I argue that people who desire this kind of pure experience need to carefully search for opponents with similar attitudes and interests, for morally acceptable play. This is why I reject the standard version of the "magic circle" view, where the

mere fact that we are playing a game somehow cancels our moral relationships and responsibilities to each other. Instead, what I claim is that games can transform intense competition into cooperation, *but only when the design features and the player interests are properly aligned*. People who are interested in that kind of purified competition should, then, carefully seek out the game designs built for such absorbed, competitive play, and carefully seek out other players who have similar motives (174-80).

Some massively-multiplayer online role-playing games offer a gentle and sociable feel, with safe zones and lots of mechanisms for socializing. In many such games, the ability for one player to attack another is limited or entirely absent. But other MMORPGs – like, famously, *EVE Online* – are designed as, and generally known to be, vicious free-for-alls. They attract players interested in a brutal, cutthroat experience. When I log onto certain online chess and poker servers, known for "serious" play, I know that the other people are there to play all-out. This is why, as Jose Zagal and I have argued, ethical game-playing of such a competitive sort depends heavily on the *social context* of play. In particular, we think that ethical play here often depends on the various communal and technological mechanisms that sort players, and match them appropriately with each other – so the cutthroat players get matched with the cutthroat players, and so forth (Nguyen and Zagal, 2016; see also 175).

In any case, I take many of Kukla's criticisms to be directed at the view that *all* game playing is, or should be, hyper-absorbed and dedicated to striving. But I am not trying to suggest any such narrow view. There are a thousand modes of game-play, each done for different reasons. (See, for example, my chart of different motivations for game-playing on pp. 32-3 – which include playing games for fun, mental health, fitness, status, aesthetic joy, or the sheer desire to win). I focus on the aesthetics of absorption because I think it so philosophically interesting – because it is the phenomenon that most exposes the lacunae in traditional theories of motivation and agency. But, once again, that philosophical point is made, not by showing the universality of such absorbed striving play, but by its possibility, and its occasional reality. Not all game-players are striving players, and not all striving players are in it for the total practical absorption. And even the ones who are have the capacity to modulate and cancel that absorption. But the fact that such absorption is possible demonstrates something significant about our potential for agential fluidity.

I am also interested in exposing a realm of aesthetic experience that is important to many game-players – in the aesthetics of absorbed striving – which is misunderstood by standard theories of value. Kukla is surely right, that much social play – hanging out with friends, and pulling out a boardgame – is very far from the absorbed, pure spirit which I've described. But Kukla also suggests that my image of the absorbed

player is an aberration — a result of a particularly odd circle of friends, perhaps. But I don't think that this pure, absorbed state is quite as idiosyncratic as Kukla suggests. There are plenty of contexts where it is the norm. Highly competitive players who seek absorption often cluster in dedicated settings: chess tournaments, *Magic: The Gathering* tournaments, rock climbing competitions, particular online servers for multiplayer shooters.

The aesthetic experiences that arise from deep absorption in the attempt to win is but one of the many possible states of play; achieving such absorption is but one in an an enormous myriad of possible motivations for players. But: it is very important to a great many players, especially those who are highly invested in game-playing. In the video game world, at least, a standard view is that one of the most desired experience is complete immersion in the practical challenge – in the world-destroying flow-state of total absorption.7 And: it would, indeed, be a disservice to bring an intense and harshly competitive attitude to a group of players interested in non-absorbed, light-hearted, social play. But it can also be a disservice to bring an unserious, light-hearted, social attitude into an environment built for intense competition. In many gaming tournaments, players have often travelled great distances in order to have the experience of devoted, intense, absorbed competition. They expect it of each other; achieving the kind of play they cherish depends on the other players adopting such attitudes. We can let down other players in such a context, by failing to bring the attitude of serious absorption to a context where it is entirely appropriate.

An analogy: it is surely true that not all experiences of movies are intense, totally absorbed experiences in the aesthetics of film. We watch movies for all sorts of reasons – from relaxation, to hanging out with our friends. It would be, to use Kukla's language, a total dick move to shout down and shush my friends' shit-talking of a movie of bad movie night, or to insist that my spouse reverently watch a Tarkovsky movie with me every night, when she desperately wants to chill out with some crappy Netflix shows after a long day of work. In each case, I am ignoring the complex social realities and plural values that can go into movie-watching. But all these observations do not block the revelation that there are, indeed, some people for whom intense, totally absorbed, reverential watching is the characteristic (or at least occasionally

7 This literature is vast. For starters, see (Kiili et al. 2012; Michailidis et al. 2018). Microsoft user experience designer Sean Baron describes the desired experience this way: "You sit down, ready to get in a few minutes of gaming. Hours pass and you suddenly become aware that you're making ridiculous faces and moving like a contortionist while trying to reach that new high score. You ask yourself: Where did the time go? When did I sprain my ankle?" (https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/166972/cognitive_flow_the_psychology_of_.php)

ideal) mode of relationship with film, and that many films are made to fulfill that mode. And it is also a totally dick move to bring your trash-talking social mode to a Tarkovsky film festival, screening rare prints in a rare opportunity for the obsessed.[8]

Onto the third criticism. Kukla suggests that games are, in the landscape of human artifacts, not as unique as I make them out to be. Plenty of other things, besides games, can also encode forms of agency. Kukla points to urban landscapes, and particularly to IKEA, as non-game artifacts and landscapes which encode and shape a particular form of agency. Such landscapes and artifacts suggest particular goals and affordances, and so also fill out our library of agencies.

In many ways, we are in deep agreement here. Thinking about the relationship between games and designed environments is actually where this entire research project began for me. I was reading the literature that treated games as a kind of fiction and found myself protesting: "If games are an art-anything, they are more like… art-governments, or art-cities!" In fact, the very first talk I ever gave on games, years ago, was entitled "Games as Landscape". Back then, I was interested in showing the profound similarity between games and urban design: that games and cities are both designed choice-spaces, which channel the movement and decisions of free agent. And, in "The Arts of Action", I offer a general account of the process arts — those arts where an artifact is designed to sculpt aesthetically valuable actions from the audience. For me, the process arts include games, social dances, social food rituals, architecture, and urban design. So I absolutely agree that IKEA, cities, and other objects can evoke action, can structure the agency of those that interact with them, and can do so in a controlled way for aesthetic purposes.

That said: I want to stand firm on what makes games distinctive. I stopped thinking that games were exactly like designed landscapes when I started thinking more about how games specify goals. Cities, it seems to me, have a relatively distant relationship to the goals of their inhabitants. The inhabitants of cities usually bring their

[8] One interesting side-note: many of Kukla's examples draw on their experience with boxing and the norms of good sportspersonship, while many of my examples draw on boardgames and videogames. One crucial difference between sports and other games is that in sports, our real bodies are at danger. One view in the philosophy of sports is that sportspersonship rules are partially there because the complexity of physics, and the danger of real bodies, means that no explicit rules could ever cover all the behavior we need to keep each other safe. So we should expect sports, especially combat sports, to involve more entangled ethical complexities than other games. Perhaps total absorption in competition is a more achievable ideal in boardgame and videogames precisely because the attacks are aimed at the resources of an artificial and destructible in-game avatar. (A related, and very thorny issue, is the ethics of trash-talking and griefing in games. One thing to note is that in many game practices, we constrain verbal abuse, since we aren't interested in putting our real emotions on the line – we just want to compete on, say, a plane of pure physical ability, or pure intellectual ability. But interestingly, this isn't always the case. Some basketball communities obviously permit some kinds of trash-talking as part of the game.)

own a wide range of goals, and the city doesn't usually get to simply specify, by fiat, the goals for its inhabitants. The city's designers can try to suggest certain goals, or nudge people to think in a certain way — but they have to work at a certain remove. IKEA has a certain advantage here. IKEA's layout designers can presume that the majority of their users are there to shop for furniture, because of the social role of stores and IKEA's niche in the market ecosystem. The designers can then channel those pre-existing interests to a certain degree. But they can't simply invent new goals and expect their customers to pivot in a moment and take them up.

But games designers can and do. What makes games special is that game designers *work directly in the medium of agency*. They can simply specify affordances, constraints, and goals, with the expectation that players will simply adopt them. As Kukla says, built environments can suggest goals by the clever manipulation of our gaze, our attention, our movements. But this is still some serious work for designers to do, in order for them to successfully cajole us. Where cities and stores have to coax, manipulate, and nudge, games can simply state. What makes games special is not merely that they manipulate agency. It is the directness, explicitness and immediacy of their manipulation of agency.

IKEA can set up a system of constraints and openness that channels motion. It can try to call our gaze in one direction or another, and work to instill in us certain longings. It can suggest we move one direction, by making another direction uncomfortable or confusing. But it can't, simply from its physical layout, simply tell us to do some very specific action in pursuit of some specific goal — for example, to run around IKEA vaulting over as many green objects as possible inside of ten minutes. This is precisely how games differ from IKEA. Games not only offer an environment that shapes action. Games with virtual environments, in fact, can make use of every bit of environmental agency engineering that IKEA can. But they can also do something over and above that: they can explicitly specify the goals which will be pursued by the in-game agents.

The notion of medium recalcitrance may be useful here. Every medium has its own inherent difficulties, which artists have to get over and around in different ways. The recalcitrance of oil painting lies in the slowness of oil; the recalcitrance of documentary photography involves actually getting the shot. In the book, I suggested that the recalcitrance of games lay in the *distance* between the game designer and the aesthetic qualities which they aimed to evoke. In many of the traditional arts, the artist has direct control over the material features that give rise to the aesthetic qualities — the words of the novel, the colors of the paint. But in games, the artist is at a further remove. They are trying to sculpt a particular aesthetic effect which will be realized in the actions of the players. So they must somehow get at some aesthetic effects through the agency of the player (149-164).

Part of the recalcitrance of cities and shops is that the designer must work very hard to suggest any kind of goal to the users. IKEA can induce a certain pattern of motion and certain interests, in its shoppers — but to do so is a significant achievement of design and layout. But a game designer can simply say: "The first person to touch that tree wins… GO!" A designer can depend on the players to flex their agential fluidity and take onboard specified goals, simply as part of the basic social practice of game-playing. Getting game-players to glom onto a goal isn't an achievement at all, but one of the basic tools in the game designer's toolkit, which the designer uses on their way to conquering a different kind of recalcitrant distance.

This is not to say that games are some strange, solitary outlier. They are obviously close kin with many other forms of agency manipulation and encoding. (And I am delighted by, and wholly agree with, Kukla's suggestion that all kinds of non-game material objects can suggest sticky forms of agency, and perform agency capture.) But games are distinctive in directly specifying structural features agency, and in their reliance on game-players to take on those specified features. Game designers can simply tell us what to aim at, rather than having to treat our aims as the recalcitrant object of their clever manipulation. Game designers get to treat specifications for agency as a fully plastic medium.

III. NOË ON WORK AND PLAY

Noë argues that games cannot be art — or, at any rate, not good art. He offers two main arguments. First, he says, art must be ambiguous and open-ended. But games are not; they are all about making the world intelligible. Second, he says, art is about interrupting and interrogating daily life. But games are not; they train us for, and reinforce, ordinary life.

Noë's conception of art is rather narrow for my taste. In saying that games are "art", all I meant was the rather minimal claim that they were artifacts made for aesthetic purposes (123-4). But I also think it will be productive think about whether games could meet Noë's rather stricter requirements, regardless of whether those requirements are genuinely the markers for "real art".

Let's start with ambiguity. Good games won't be art, says Noë, because art is ambiguous, and games make the world clear and intelligible. He points to my own analysis for support. I argue that much of the pleasure of game-playing comes from their *value clarity.* Game goals are entirely lucid. They make our in-game actions more intelligible by giving us explicit and inflexible specifications of our in-game goals. Games might become art, he says, but to do so they will have to give up that intelligibility,

and so they will suck as games. When they become art, they can no longer really be played.

Let's accept, for the sake of argument, Noë's demand that art should be ambiguous and open-ended. But still, I think Noë's argument makes use of an exaggerated binary between the ambiguity of art and the intelligibility of games. Many art-forms involve the arrangement some utterly intelligible features. These are the building blocks, from which the artist builds towards some larger ambiguity. This is not true of all art. Mark Rothko's paintings and Jorie Graham's poems are, perhaps, ambiguous through and through. But other works have plainer foundations. Many novels are built from clear language and crisply described events. When I read Chekhov, or Melville, or Cather, there is little ambiguity in the referents for terms like "lady" or "dog" or "ship" or "ocean". Much of the joy of, say, Jane Austen arises when I have imagined the social scenario, the personal character, and the vocal tones, very much as she had described. What is ambiguous is something in the larger picture which emerges from those details — in the emotional meaning of Chekhov's lady with the dog, in how I am to assemble the various ethical judgments of Austen's characters, in the strange emotional tenor that arises from Kafka's precise descriptions of this horrifying tattoo machine. Some art creates emergent ambiguity out of crisp and clear parts.

The same, I suggest, is true of games. Game goals are part of the clear and intelligible grounds, from which more ambiguous experience arise. Recall the strange inverted motivational structure of striving play. We aim at a goal, not for the value of the goal, but for the sake of some quality in the struggle. For aesthetic striving play, in particular, this means that the aesthetic qualities we value do not lie in the goals. We induce in ourselves a struggle towards an intelligible goal — and then our aesthetic appreciation emerges in our reflection towards what that struggle *felt like*. Playing a game can involve a first-order intelligible experience of struggling to hit a clear goal, and a second-order reflection on ambiguous features of that first-order experience.[9]

During an intense rock climb, I am trying to get through a sequence of three difficult moves. First I throw clumsily for the first hold, barely making it. Next I figure out a quick sequence of tiny balance changes that lets me shift my weight over, that lets me easily get the second hold. Finally I bunch up and make a desperate, off-balance throw for the last hold, which I — thrillingly — just barely manage to grab. My actions at the moment are guided by one clear goal: to get up the rock. But I can reflect on those experiences and discover, in them, aesthetic joys that are quite mysterious and

9 The solution I suggest here parallels my solution to the worry about the tension between disinterestedness and game-play. I suggested that we could have an absorbed first-order experience of an interested practical struggle, and a second-order reflective, disinterested experience of that first-order experience (114-20).

open-ended. Why was that middle part so elegant? It was such a simple set of movements, but it glowed with a wondrous delicacy. Why was the first throw so clumsy and awkward and gross, and the second one — though just as off-balance and hurried — so wonderfully dramatic? The practical considerations that guide my actions in a game may be intelligible, but the aesthetic nature of those actions can be just as ambiguous and open-ended as with any other artwork.

On to Noë's second argument. Games cannot be art, he says, because art — real art — interrupts and interrogates ordinary life. But games, he says, are just part of ordinary life. There are a few versions of this argument. First, he says, games are continuous with ordinary life, especially the process of evaluating and judging. Games are used to measure, he says. In a game, it is our wit on measure, our own real ability on display. Of course, I grant, games can be used in such a way. But, of course, so can the rest of the arts. Knowledge of the arts is, as the sociologists tell us, constantly used as part of a social gatekeeping process. We can judge each other for our knowledge of modern art and Greek mythology. Why think that games are anything special in this regard? One's athletic prowess is on display in baseball — but so is the athletic prowess (and grace) of a modern dancer. Games provide one kind of measure of ability, but so does your bookshelf and your ability to talk intelligently about Proust.

Here, Noë is implicitly proposing a motivational purity requirement in his criticism. His argument depends on the claim that we (sometimes) use games to judge each other, and so they cannot be art. But why accept this purity requirement? If I read Kant carefully in order to impress my classmates, I have still read Kant carefully and absorbed the ideas. If I read Proust to pass as an elite, I can find myself carried away by its aesthetic wonders. And I can still experience, and learn from, the alternate agencies in games, even if I took it up in part for other, socially entangled reasons. Moreover, I don't see why we should accept Noë's claim about how and why games are always engaged in primarily for such evaluations. For every high school football team where the players are testing their mettle, there is another stupid drinking game, or kids at a party playing *Twister* or *WarioWare*, or a gleefully imaginative game of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

One might imagine Noë responding: We might sometimes use other arts as a means of measurement, but games always measure. Measurement is intrinsic to their essential nature! What matters for Noë 's criticism, however, is whether the internal measurement of a game connects up with the measurements we care about, in workaday life. And some games surely do: such as the so-called "educational" games that are used to teach and measure basic skills, the gamifications of work. But games can also measure things that are entirely meaningless – as do many drinking games and

party games. One of the recurring threads of the book is that some games are intentionally about stupid skills, which we don't care about having, especially funny, stupid games (10, 41-42, 133-5). And even with games which measure some useful skill, the question is why we engage in that measurement. The point of my entire book is that one can engage in the pursuit of succeeding by a measure for some sake other than the value of success at that measure. That is the essence of striving play. Here is the heart of my dispute with Noë: whether it is possible to *playfully* try to win. And my response to this dispute is, essentially, the book itself, especially the long series of arguments for the possibility of striving play in Chapters 2 and 3. Noë's analysis here depends on the presuming, without further argument, that striving play is impossible.

What I had hoped to show is, in a sense, that some of the forms of striving play involve *playing around* with measurement – with trying it on in strange ways, which can bring to light the role measurement has in our life. We can play around with measurement to expose and interrogate the very procedures and attitudes involved in workday evaluation. In games, we can use a special kind of measurement to interrogate our habitual and unthinking practices of measurement. And, by Noë's own lights, what could be higher art than that?

Noë's favored art form is dance. Dance is an art because it interrupts the way we normally move. It forces us out of our everyday habits of movement. The act of dancing brings new configurations to our body parts in motion. It pulls us into new ways of moving, which can bring us to question our usual movement routine. It asks us to think about *why* we are moving the way we do, in part by making us step back from our ordinary ways of moving. Dance opens up new possibilities. Dance is art, and art, says Noë, is *strange*. But, Noë worries, games simply train us for ordinary life, for work. Football teaches us to stoically aggressive, to work as a team to get some end. Other games make us grind for points. As he puts it, they are more like a summer job or a stint in the military, than art.

I think the Noë's comparison here begins in a hidden unfairness. After all, even the most vaunted categories of art are also full of works which are humdrum, daily-life-enforcing, and work-embracing. So much dance is just enforcing standard gender norms or relationships norms. (Think about a high school prom.) So many movies are teaching some standard norms of masculinity and femininity, or inculcating a military fetish. So many novels glorify conformity to social norms and workaday life. What a medium is *capable of* at its best and what it is typically *used for,* by the cruel and tedious world, are quite different. And we should expect, with any medium, that its potencies will be used for good or ill. Every medium can be put to noble artistic uses, but also bent by corporations and authoritarian states for propaganda (190). And I think Noë has framed the situation by asking us to compare the most extraordinary forms

of dance with the most mundane of games.

So the question should not be, "Does every game interrogate our way of being?" but, "Is it possible for games to interrogate our way of being?" And I think they can. Games can interrogate the way we inhabit our agency by getting us to take up new kinds of action and occupy new forms of agency, and getting us to reflect on the relationships between these actions and these agencies. Games can, through their specification of affordances, environments, and goals, can get us to try out new forms of action and new kinds of agency — and interrupt and interrogate our usual modes of agency.

My exchange with Noë here bears a certain resemblance to my exchange with Miguel Sicart (74-98). Sicart suggests that play can make us more free, but games cannot. Instead of encouraging us to be playful, creative, and autonomous, games put us under the authority of strict rules. My response is to point out that *temporarily* following strict rules can help us to be more free. When we are free to move or act any which way we like, we often repeat our habits and ruts. Strict orders can force us out of our habits, to find new postures. This is how yoga works — to help us find new ways to move, using the tool of temporary strictness. Games, I suggested, are yoga for your agency. A similar response can be made to Noë: we can temporarily enter into a more intelligible space in which our agency is shaped precisely by rules and goals. But precise specification is actually a way to communicate agency. It can teach us a new way of thinking and moving, a new form of agency to occupy. And what better way to interrupt and interrogate our normal modes of agency, than to, for a brief moment, stop acting within our normal agency and try on a new one?

But could that be built into the game itself? Jane Austen didn't simply display the social norms of her time. She included distance, reflection and disruption in the novels themselves. Could something like that be built into games? I think so. And here I think the best way to make the case is simply to describe some recent game designs that do it.

Root: a Game of Woodland Might and Right is highly asymmetrical board-game. There are different roles to play, each of which has a different goal and a different set of rules. One role is the Marquise de Cat — a bourgeois industrialist, who builds factories to build more factories and wins by maintaining the status quo. Another role is the Woodland Alliance — revolutionaries, who win by gaining sympathy, converting the people, and disrupting the status quo. Another role is the Eyrie — warmongers who are aggressive but dogmatic, and gain power by sticking unswervingly to a premade plan. Each role requires a different practical style. They each expose different aspects of the game's simulated world — a different network of causal relationships to manipulate. The point of the game is to play every position, and experience and re-

experience the same socio-economic struggle from different angles. And this ends up revealing something extraordinary. The game actually gets you to *experience* the narrow focus of each position — focusing on industry, or political manipulation, or military might. And then it harshly exposes that narrowness, by forcing you into one practical focus, and then jerking you into another one, which shows you those very same causal mechanisms from a completely different angle. What better way of disrupting our everyday, habitual practical focuses, then getting us to shift rapidly between incredibly different ones? *Root* actually exposes for us the limitations on many of our daily practical viewpoints, by forcing us to be absorbed in one, and then hop to another, and see what we had missed. And note: in order for *Root* to have this effect, players don't, as Noë suggests, have to stop playing it as a game. They have to play the hell out of it, being absorbed in the mechanics of their particular position in each particular playing, in order for the whole picture to emerge.

Or, take the indie tabletop roleplaying game, *Blades in the Dark*. In this game, you all role-play as a bunch of con artists or thieves in a magical, demon-infested Victorian steampunk city. The game has, at its core, an entirely innovative storytelling mechanic. You all decide to break into, say, the central bank. The game specifies that the *characters* will plan for a month for that job, but the *players* will skip over that planning. The characters, the game specifies, will have done an incredible amount of planning and preparation. But the players have no idea what planning their own characters have done. Then, as the game proceeds and the characters run into obstacles, the players spend from a limited store of points to call for flashbacks. In one game, my spouse's character is thrown off of a boat into a river full of cannibal mermaids; she called for a flashback and role-played out how she had, two weeks earlier, gone to forge an alliance with those mermaids.[10] The game inverts the usual causal order of narratives; he players are permitted to play around with past events to make them fit their present needs. Again — how is this training for work? It is a disruption of our normal relationship to causal networks and narrative structures. It opens up a new way of thinking about how stories work. It makes the logic of narrative strange.

Or, consider *Codenames*, a wonderful new party game. *Codenames* is a game of constrained communication, played between two teams. The board consists of 25 randomized tiles, each with a different word. Each team has a Spymaster, who is given a randomized selection of tiles which they must get their teammates to pick. The Spymaster can only communicate in one way: on their turn, they can say one word and

[10] Due to some failed rolls in the flashback, her character ended up romancing the queen of the mermaids, then having to break off that romance and flee. So when we arrived back at the present, it turned out that her character had been flung off the ship straight into the arms of her angry, jilted, lover — who happened to be a magical mermaid queen with a cannibal army.

one number. I might say, “Diamond: 3” — trying to communicate to my teammates that I think there are three tiles on the board that have something to do with diamonds. Perhaps I am trying to get you to pick, “Forever”, “Baseball,” and “Marriage”. But instead you pick “Forever,” “Marriage,” and “Spy” — because “Diamond” reminds you of that one James Bond movie. And when we discover the difference in our thought processes, we curse and laugh at each other.

Codenames is a hysterical delight. And what makes it so funny is how it plays with our patterns of thought. Most players start out by giving clues that depend on their own natural network of associations. But the game quickly reveals how different our conceptual networks are. And it forces us to try to step out of our own networks and see other possible networks of association — to jump into each other’s minds and conceptual maps. The game is rather brain-breaking, in an entertaining way. And I cannot think of a better way to describe this, than by saying that *Codenames* — this funny, charming, simple little game — asks us to interrupt our usual conceptual network, to interrogate them, to see past our usual sense of what is obvious.

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