

## Comments on Thi Nguyen's *Games: The Art of Agency*

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Nick Riggle

I am one of the ten million people who love Thi's book. It's groundbreaking, original through-and-through, fun, challenging, bold, insightful, full of wild and fascinating examples...it's easy to keep going. I came to wonder, though, whether there is an issue at the heart of it that Thi neglects. The issue initially concerns imaginative engagement but once we bring it out, it sheds strange light on his theory of agency and makes me wonder about his understanding of the aesthetic value of games.

### Caring

To be a 'temporary agent' is to 'care about' a 'disposable end' or to 'temporarily' care about an end 'as final'. (pp. 10-11) Thi writes that we care about game-specified ends but our caring and commitment is temporary and, as he puts it, 'fickle'. (p. 61)

The very idea of 'temporary caring' can seem incoherent. The standard Frankfurtian analysis of caring is that it involves a commitment to a desire. But if our desire for an end is 'disposable' and essentially temporary, then there can be no real commitment.<sup>1</sup> Of course there are times when we seem to ourselves to care a lot about something but then the seeming fades: summer flings, fleeting obsessions. In these cases we return to ourselves and realize that we didn't *really* care, that something overcame us, or we overrated the thing, or just enjoyed being carried away.

But Thi's emphasis on caring gets even harder to understand. He writes that in games we take up goals temporarily, not because we actually care about achieving them in an enduring way, but because we want to have a certain kind of struggle. (p. 27) Usually when someone does not desire something 'in an enduring way' we say that they do not *really* care about it. And this is *especially* true when the source of their caring is not the good of the thing cared about but something else, where the purported object of care is treated instrumentally. In that case, not only was one's 'care' fleeting; it was also illusory. 'You just used me' one might say, or, 'you don't care about the music; you only really about fame and money'.

But is caring really the notion that Thi needs to use? In other passages he talks of an 'interest' we 'take on' for the sake of the game-activity (p. 28; see pp. 36-37 for use of both 'care' and 'interest'). Of course, one is interested in the objects of care, but many of one's interests are not things one has a caring relation to. But the notion of 'interest' Thi is concerned with is no

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<sup>1</sup> When we do care about something, we go beyond wanting it. We want to *go on* wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached. Thus, we feel it as a lapse on our part if we neglect the desire, and we are disposed to take steps to refresh the desire if it should tend to fade. The caring entails, in other words, a commitment to the desire. (Frankfurt, Tanner Lectures, 180)

casual affair. It is important for Thi that it be intense enough to motivate serious engagement. For only devoted, absorbed engagement will deliver the striving goods. “[T]he interest in winning has to temporarily take the phenomenal position of being something like a final end.” (46)

The positive attitude one is supposed to have, here, is an attitude toward what Thi thinks of as a distinctive object, what he calls a ‘disposable end’: “A disposable end is an end that is not directly attached to one’s other enduring ends. It is an end that one takes up voluntarily and that one can rid oneself of without doing significant damage to one’s enduring value system or core practical identity.” (pp. 33-34)

To me a fairly natural way to make sense of the ‘pro-attitude’ Thi has in mind is to think of it as *imagined caring*, which one might spell out as make-believe caring, caring-as-pretense, or some other way. This is a perfectly natural attitude (children caring for dolls and such) and one with which we can get ‘carried away’ (à la Velleman) and, via it, absorbed in activity. If the intermediate oboe student is bored with playing scales and anxious to master Bach’s Concerto for Violin and Oboe, she might be advised, “imagine caring about the scales the way you care about mastering Bach,” and in so imagining she finds the motivation to practice. [Of course there are many cases where players really care about some game-end—baseball players and winning, mountain climbers and getting to the top—but they are not pure striving players.]

But Thi never considers the idea of imagined-caring. He does argue against a closely related idea, which he calls ‘pretend ends’ (p. 44). He argues that striving play cannot involve ‘pretending’ that some non-goal really is a goal. The skeptical thought Thi is responding to is that striving play can be explained not in terms of Thi’s system—temporarily caring about disposable ends— but in terms of pretending that something is a goal (when it’s not, as in so many games). “[P]erhaps when I am playing a game, I am play-acting as if something is my end, rather than taking it on as an actual end.” (p. 44) Thi argues against this on the grounds that it conflates acting and striving play. Actors themselves do not typically have the desires and ends that their characters have, while in games players *do* typically desire to win.

But this response seems to muddle the distinction between imagined-caring and imagining that something is a worthy goal or ‘end’ (perhaps the muddle is packed into the very idea of an ‘end’). To pretend ‘as if something is my end’ is to *both* imagine that something is a goal and that one really cares about it. These are not the same thing.

Thi writes that “The disposable ends of games cannot appear to us as straightforward and transparent means to some other end. They need to function for us, temporarily, like final ends.” He often describes the end as ‘winning’ and that this is ‘disposable’; that we ‘take up an interest in winning for the sake of the struggle’ (p. 52). I find this a little puzzling because winning is a *genuine* end recognized by everyone, generically speaking. Everyone *likes* to win, especially when we’re just playing around in a game. But liking is not caring, and we often don’t *care* about winning, even though we like to, or we recognize that winning isn’t the only good around, or that other ends are much more interesting. Imagining we *care* about an end

whether we like it or not can be the very thing that really gets us into the game as striving players.<sup>2</sup>

If winning is the goal and we imagine we care about it, then the end will not appear as a means; it will seem final if you're good enough at imagining caring. Doing so would not compromise the sincerity of their engagement. And one would not be regarding the end of winning instrumentally, for the sake of the striving. True, one would have instrumental reasons *to imagine one cares* about winning but not *to regard winning as worthwhile*. In general, one can regard winning as worthwhile enough on its own but not give much of a damn about it. But when I imagine *caring* about it, all the benefits of striving come into view.<sup>3</sup>

[Furthermore, imagining caring about winning does not require us to regard every aspect of the game in Waltonian terms, as props in a game of make-believe. When you imagine caring about winning the game, your imagined caring distributes across the game: you care about collecting green tokens, paper money, or whatever.]

So my question for Thi is this: instead of 'temporarily caring' about a 'disposable end' why not talk of 'imagined caring' about a real end?

## Agency

I take it that Thi is out to upend the 'standard analyses' of action and agency that we know from Frankfurt and such, but without a thorough look at why the notion of imagined caring cannot be put to work, I find myself less invested in the agential architecture Thi designs. I wonder, then, how his notion of agency might be revised.

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<sup>2</sup> Thi sometimes talks of the 'pure' striving player who 'intrinsically value[s] the experiences of striving and [doesn't] value winning at all.' (p. 53, 72) I find this person hard to imagine—do they lack the concept of winning? Winning is great. I doubt that games would exist without possibility of victory in arbitrary competition. And victory is great. The definition of the 'pure striving player' is not the same definition as that of the 'intrinsic striving player' who plays 'simply for the value of the struggle'. But one can play 'simply for the value of the struggle' while recognizing the good of winning, not really caring about it, but imagining that they do. (Thi distinguishes early on between purposes and goals. The former is our reason for playing the game, while the latter is our target during the game. (p. 5) They can be the same, e.g. money in poker.)

<sup>3</sup> Another benefit of this view is that it explains things that remain obscure on Thi's view, for example, the fact that it is inappropriate to continue playing a game when a suffering friend starts crying in the middle of it. If we are both submerged in our 'inner' agencies and one of us is forced out by overwhelming emotions, what makes it the case that it is *wrong* for me to continue to care about winning? Thi can easily say that, psychologically, I might be forced out too, say, from the compassion I feel for my friend. But why is it wrong? On the imagining view I'm suggesting, one can appeal to the norms of imagining together. If we have decided to imagine caring about winning together, then we have agreed to be responsive to each other's imagination-relevant actions as such. If one of us clearly starts issuing non-imaginative actions—say, crying when we both know that some other action is more appropriate for the imaginative task—then the agreement is lost and everyday norms of moral responsiveness take center stage.

Thi thinks that we *actually care* about *temporary ends*. So how does this game-designed caring figure into our broader and more enduring suite of cares and concerns—our everyday and more important will?

Thi claims that we are capable of ‘agential layering’:

Striving play involves a complex process of agential layering, where the players create and deploy a temporary agency, nested inside their primary agency, with its own particular ends and modes of practicality. And it’s important to think of this as a layered agency, rather than a changed agency, since the temporary agency is still under the justificational thumb of the overall agency. (69)

Thi argues that these special capacities give us ‘agential fluidity’, allowing us to switch between ‘agencies’.

Is this structure too elaborate? If the form of ‘caring’ involved in gameplay is really imagined caring, then we don’t actually need to appeal to agential layering. Agency is a configuration of will, affected by change in belief, desire, and intention, or in how these are *configured* or *structured* in a particular agent. The *experience* of agency is experience *as of* an agent. We experience our own agency when we experience ourselves as acting on our own beliefs, desires, and intentions. But if gameplay only requires changes in *imagined* cares and concerns, then we do not need to take on any real desires and subordinate them to our other more enduring ones. The only thing that needs to happen is a sort of momentary tempering of our real cares and concerns—a tempering of the familiar kind when we are caught up in imagination.

It is notable here that Thi’s text can be unclear about a crucial related issue. Do games affect our agency or our *experience* of agency? In many places Thi writes that games use the medium of agency itself: “...investigating how games work in the medium of agency will actually teach us something about the nature of agency.” (p. 18) But Thi sometimes retreats to the *experience* of agency: “Striving players do not play to win; they acquire a disposable interest in winning in order to have the **activity or experience** of struggling for the win.” (33, emphasis added) Or, “Games can give us access to **rich experiences** of different modes of agency, and of **different arrangements of agency** within varying social structures. Games can **experientially immerse** a player in an alternative agency, making that mode of agency more available to the player elsewhere in life.” (81, emphasis added)

If imagined caring is what’s central to striving play, then we can say that games induce experiences as of agency without supplying direct engagement with alternative agential modes—they simulate what it’s like to care about an end one does not really care about.

If games mainly affect our mere experiences of agency—if they ‘simulate’ agency—then certain worries that Thi addresses at length are diminished. For example, there is a tension related to how we think about responsibility and ownership of action. When our interests are externally

manipulated, or internally tweaked by drugs, overwhelming moods, and so on, the actions we perform under such conditions are typically not our own; they express conative states to which we are not committed or even committed against. We are often not responsible for various events that might be caused by our behavior in those conditions. Given the emphasis that Thi places on the game designer's *determining* one's courses of action, one might worry that gameplayers are a little like people whose interests are externally manipulated and whose agency is not enhanced but thereby *reduced*, if not entirely erased (they chose to play the game, after all). Thi responds to these worries by claiming that games make us freer by helping us "receive and experience modes of agency that have been prepared by another" (76), making us more agentially fluid. But the worry never arises, or does not arise nearly as sharply, if we focus on experiences as of agency via imagined caring, for those do not directly affect our real agency. (They might *indirectly* affect it. Thi can still draw out various lines he's interested in, e.g., that gameplay has various extra-game upshots like expanding our knowledge of agency, since we can learn from imaginative experience.)

So why not focus on notions of *imagined caring* and *experiences as of agency*, rather than the more complicated notions of *disposable ends* and *agential layering and fluidity*?

### **Aesthetic Value**

These shifts of emphasis between experience and the real thing show up in the way Thi talks about the aesthetics of games. Consider this passage:

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

This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatic aesthetic experience of playing games.  
(12-13)

Thi refers to three loci of harmony: harmony of an action (the way an action can be just right for the challenge), harmony of fit between abilities and challenges (the way one's capacities as a whole can issue the perfect solution), and the *experience* of harmony of fit.

Thi thinks that the aesthetic value of games is a (main) reason for striving players to engage, and he construes this value in terms of harmony of fit, or more generally in terms of the aesthetic experiences striving players can have of their own gaming activity. But here again we can ask what matters, the *experience* of harmony or the actual harmonious action? Is a game

aesthetically good in virtue of its capacity to supply experiences of harmony? Is Thi an aesthetic value empiricist here?

It seems like it. To say that games provide aesthetic experiences—and that those experiences can be our reason for engaging with games—is not necessarily to be committed to hedonism about the aesthetic value of games. But Thi also writes that “*Aesthetic striving games*, then, are games designed primarily for the purpose of providing aesthetic experiences of practicality to their players.” (13) It sounds like what makes a striving game aesthetically good is its designed capacity to elicit experiences of practical harmony. That is standard empiricism about aesthetic value applied to games.

This, it seems to me, reveals a tension in Thi’s overall theory of games. Thi is an empiricist about the aesthetic value of games, but my sense is that empiricism fits better with the experiential picture of games that I have been suggesting, where imagined caring and experiences as of agency take center stage. If Thi really wants his *agential* picture, then why not argue against the experiential picture and adopt a non-hedonic theory of the aesthetic value of games?

What theory is that? Here’s a thought: striving games are fun...to play...together. Let’s unpack that. They are *fun*: they are entertaining, diverting, enjoyable, pleasurable, joyful. They make us silly, bring out our sense of humor, of intensity, of creativity, and call on and hone our special skills. They are fun *to play*: we *play* games, or when we game we are often *playing* in a Schillerian sense. We shed our normal sense of self and open ourselves to the wild twists and turns of the game, to the inventions and spontaneities of our game-mates, and to our own sense of possibility within the game. And games are fun to play *together*: games are by-and-large *joint activities* that, in calling on our special abilities and skills and inviting us to play, reliably generate mutual interpersonal valuing among the players: we value each other’s silliness, inventiveness, special skills, and so on. Games are best when this mutual positive regard is running strong and generating deeper, sillier, more sincere engagement.

Because striving games are fun to play together in these ways, they are worthy of *the practice of aesthetic valuing*—the practice of creating objects and engaging with objects and others in ways that cultivate individuality, promote ‘play’ or aesthetic freedom, and generate aesthetic community. As such, games belong with all the other aesthetic practices, whose traditions and structures generate aesthetic engagement along with the individuality, freedom, and community that govern such engagement. And whose products are, because of that, aesthetically good. On this view, the aesthetic value of games does not depend on their delivering aesthetic experiences, but on their engaging us in the practice of aesthetic valuing. Thi can leverage his theories of agential layering, agential fluidity, in-game striving, disposable ends, harmony, and temporary caring to explain how games are aesthetically special not merely or centrally because they give individuals certain aesthetic experiences of their actions but because of the special way that games engage and connect us as individuals.