

artefact of the game itself; it is in the beautiful actions the game instigates in its players.<sup>1</sup>

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## How Much Are Games Like Art?

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In a series of stimulating writings, C. Thi Nguyen has made novel connections between the theory of art and the theory of games. In ‘Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement’ (Nguyen 2019), he argues that we should see the aesthetic judgement of works of art as in important ways like playing a game. And in *Games: Agency as Art*, he makes the converse argument: that a central feature of game-play, and the source of much of its value, is that it offers aesthetic experiences, in particular of one’s own agency.<sup>1</sup> Playing a game, he claims, is like engaging with art.

His argument builds on the analysis of game-play in Bernard Suits’s *The Grasshopper* (Suits 1978, 2014). In playing a game, Suits says, you pursue a goal that can be understood and achieved outside the game, for example that a ball goes into a hole in the ground or that you stand atop a mountain. But the game has rules, and they forbid the most efficient means to this goal; in golf, you may not drop your ball in the hole by hand, nor in climbing use a helicopter. Finally, to be playing a game you must willingly accept the restrictions its rules impose, because you want to pursue its goal by only the means they allow. On this basis, Nguyen defines the ‘striving play’ whose nature and value he most wants to explore. While engaged in this play you care, even intensely, about your game’s goal, or, more abstractly, about winning, but you adopt this goal only temporarily, so you can engage in the process of pursuing it. What you value ultimately is only that process, and when the game is over your interest in its goal vanishes.

Suits’s analysis is sometimes associated with the following view of the value of playing games. In serious games such as golf, mountain-climbing and chess, which offer more than just amusement and are worth devoting time and

1 Bracket page references are to this book (Nguyen 2020).

practice to, the rules make achieving their goal not just more difficult than it would otherwise be but also by absolute standards difficult. Succeeding in them, or even just playing them well, therefore involves doing something difficult, or the intrinsic value some call ‘achievement’ (Bradford 2015, Hurka 2020). This value can also be found outside games, for example in successful business activity or in winning a just war, but it’s present in an especially pure form in games. Since a goal like getting a ball in a hole is intrinsically trivial, any value in the activity must come entirely from the process of pursuing it. Here games are worth playing because they pose difficult challenges it can be a valuable achievement to meet.<sup>2</sup>

Nguyen proposes a different view, on which a central value in game-play is the aesthetic experiences it allows of your own agency, or of aesthetic qualities your activity can have such as elegance, gracefulness and harmony. He doesn’t say this is the only value afforded by games; enjoyment is presumably one too, as one hopes is difficult achievement. (At one point he says, ‘in most games striving is only desirable when the challenge is of appropriate difficulty’ (175).) But his strong emphasis on the aesthetic element in game-play suggests that he thinks it’s at least a major value. Though there can be many reasons to play games, the aesthetic experience of your own agency that game-playing allows is, for Nguyen, an important - perhaps even the most important - one.

This view is interwoven in his book with another that he treats as closely connected to it but that actually seems logically independent. He argues that games allow you to experience different styles of acting, or try out different modes of agency. Sometimes the idea is that every game, given its specific goal and rules, calls forth a different form of agency; sometimes it’s more that game-play in general, with its single focus on the one goal of winning, frees you from the constant demand in everyday life to balance conflicting values. Either way, Nguyen argues that game-play encourages ‘agential fluidity’, or the ability to switch autonomously between different ways of acting, where this is both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. Interesting though this argument is, it has no direct connection with aesthetic qualities such as elegance and harmony: it could be valuable to experience different forms of agency even though none involved any beauty. There is, to be sure, a connection with art here, which some say exposes us to new forms of experience, some paintings showing us new ways of seeing the world and some novels new ways of feeling. But there, too, the idea that it’s good to have new or varied experiences is distinct from the idea that it’s good to have specifically aesthetic experiences, or ones specifically of beauty. Though Nguyen tends to gather the two together, misleadingly in my view, under the single heading ‘the aesthetics of agency’, I’ll focus just on his view that much of the value in striving play comes from the experiences it offers of aesthetic qualities. While agreeing that this play does afford these experiences and that they have worth, I’ll question

2 I defend this view in Hurka 2006.

whether this view accounts for as much of the value of games as he claims, and in particular for as much as the view that they're occasions for difficult achievement.

Nguyen argues against the achievement view, but on a puzzling ground (3–4). His complaint is that difficulty is a 'commonplace' value, found outside game-play rather than unique to it, and also found in activities such as winning a just war that have more value than game-play. But if these last activities are better, it's because they involve values other than achievement, such as the instrumental value of saving lives. And isn't his own value of aesthetic experience likewise instantiated outside game-play, most obviously in the engagement with art he compares it to? Aren't his specific aesthetic qualities, such as elegance and harmony, also found in art? Perhaps he thinks it's important that in game-play these qualities are instantiated in the specific medium of your agency. But it doesn't make for a significantly distinct value if elegance is embodied in music rather than in painting, so why should it here? The demand that the value in game-play depend on some unique feature of it is both unpersuasive – why can't it be more widely shared? – and not obviously satisfied by his own view.

Nguyen usefully distinguishes several different aesthetic objects you can appreciate in game-play, the first and most obvious of which are specific acts or moves you do. Sports like figure-skating and gymnastics that are judged on explicitly aesthetic grounds are actually anomalous, only partly a game and partly a performance. More central for him are the qualities of acts that contribute especially pleasingly to a more standard or non-aesthetic game-goal, such as an elegant strategy in chess or the smoothness with which a striker in football receives a pass on his chest and, in one flowing move, controls it, turns and shoots on goal. From his own sport of rock-climbing Nguyen describes the 'deliberateness and gracefulness that got me through a delicate sequence of holds' (12). There clearly is aesthetic quality and value in these acts, and he describes it well.

One question, though, is just how much aesthetic quality, or how much beauty, these acts have, especially in comparison with, say, a Beethoven sonata or Philip Larkin poem. Is their quality comparable to that of the artworks or more limited? Nguyen says little about this, but it's an important issue. If game-acts have comparatively limited aesthetic value, experience of them will give game-play comparatively limited worth. I suspect that many will say these acts have considerably less aesthetic quality than the finest works of art. If, despite this, chess and rock-climbing are no less good activities, and no less valuable ways of spending time, than engaging with music or poetry, as I would urge, game-play must have some significant other value, such as difficult achievement, that makes up the difference.

Though Nguyen offers a game-act's aesthetic quality as an alternative ground of its value to difficulty, it's actually closely tied to difficulty. He doesn't find elegance in a chess beginner's opening move of P-K4 nor grace

in some utterly easy move on a rock face. Only reasonably difficult acts have these aesthetic qualities, and in fact, their beauty may supervene on their difficulty. Often the challenge in a game is to perform compound acts that combine, in some precisely ordered way, subsidiary acts that are themselves precisely aimed and of different kinds, so different skills are needed to perform them. But this general idea of unifying diverse elements so they contribute to a single end, or of ‘organic unity’, is sometimes thought to underlie at least many instances of beauty. So what makes for the difficulty in Nguyen’s delicate sequence of climbing moves may also make for its beauty. This doesn’t mean experiencing the beauty isn’t independently valuable. Despite depending on an act’s difficulty, it can be a distinct good from, and potentially more important than, the difficulty. But it does raise the question of how much, when we admire an elegant or graceful game-move, we’re responding to that aesthetic quality and how much instead to the underlying difficult achievement.

Though beautiful game-acts are typically difficult, not all difficult game-acts are beautiful. A weightlifter has to perform a precisely timed sequence of leg and arm movements that indeed has aesthetic quality, but he also needs brute strength; of two equally well-sequenced lifts, the one involving more strength will lift more. Is there anything especially aesthetic in the bare exercise of physical strength? That seems dubious, and the same holds of a distance runner’s breaking through the pain barrier or willing herself on through exhaustion. Dealing with psychic obstacles like these is a key challenge in distance racing, yet it doesn’t have the obvious aesthetic quality of an elegant chess or football move. If sports centred on these challenges are worth playing, it can’t be mainly because they let you experience Nguyen’s first kind of aesthetic object. It can, however, be because of their difficulty.

A psychic challenge in many games is dealing with pressure, or having to make correct plays while under stress. It’s one thing to make a 5-foot putt on the practice green or in a casual round of golf; it’s quite another to make it to win the Open Championship or even a one-on-one match in a club tournament. But, again, successfully handling pressure doesn’t have any obvious aesthetic quality such as elegance. In addition, it’s often not something you experience. Golfers are taught to have an unvarying pre-shot routine, with, for example, the same number of waggles or practice putts before each stroke. The point is to make high-pressure situations feel, from the inside, like routine ones. But if that technique works you don’t experience your handling of the pressure, because you’ve blocked the pressure from your mind. Distance runners likewise often fight through their pain by distracting their minds from it; they too don’t experience their success and couldn’t appreciate its aesthetic quality even if it had some.

These cases point to an over-simplification in Nguyen’s account of striving play. His strivers, recall, value their game’s goal only while playing and not either before or after. But a common striving desire is to face the challenge of

pressure. Professional golfers relish nothing more than ‘being in the hunt’ in the late stages of a major tournament; even many amateurs play for money, so more will be riding on their shots. And while it’s in principle possible to feel pressure with only Nguyen’s temporary interest in winning, most of us can’t do that. We need something extra at stake to feel seriously stressed; however much we may want to win in his way, we want it more if cash or a career is on the line. (The golfer Lee Trevino said ‘Pressure is when you play for five dollars with only two in your pocket’.) The desire to handle pressure is a desire for a feature of the striving process, but it’s mostly had only by those who care about winning as something outside that process, or in more than Nguyen’s pure striving way.

Though this first type of aesthetic object may be the most obvious, Nguyen downplays it because it’s not available only or sometimes even especially to players, and it’s the value of *playing* games that he most wants to explain. A rock-climber may have more awareness, through proprioception, of the smoothness of his transitions than any spectator could, but the elegance of a chess strategy can be appreciated as much by a knowledgeable observer as by its author. If a football mid-fielder makes a blind pass to where he’s confident his striker will be, he can’t see, as in this case a spectator can, the precision with which his ball reaches its target. And if the striker takes the pass and scores a goal, the result may be a beautiful joint achievement, and if we can speak of group agents, it’s something the two of them, or perhaps their whole team, together did. But there’s no single experience, from the inside, of this beauty. The mid-fielder experiences just his part and the striker his; the aesthetic quality of the whole, or of the connections that make for that whole, is no more available to them than to their fans. If Nguyen’s main topic is the value of playing, not watching, games, this first aesthetic experience can’t be its main ground.

His second aesthetic object, to which he gives rather more weight, isn’t a beautiful game-move itself but ‘the aesthetics of the process of generating that move’, or ‘aesthetic qualities that arise in the act of analyzing, deciding, seeing, responding, and doing’ (107). Unlike the first object, this one is mostly accessible only to players. While a spectator can observe an elegant chess strategy, only the player herself has direct experience of the reasoning or insight that led to it. But the idea that experiencing this object gives game-play significant value again raises several questions.

One is why we should think the process of selecting a game-move itself has aesthetic qualities it’s valuable to experience. Though it may result in something aesthetic, it’s a fallacy to think the process of producing something beautiful must itself be beautiful. Often, in fact, it’s the opposite, full of wrong turns, randomness and frustration; often elegance emerges from something decidedly non-elegant. This isn’t to say the production of aesthetically pleasing objects, for example in art, isn’t valuable. It is, but its value needn’t be aesthetic or rest on aesthetic properties in the productive process itself. It can be more

that of achievement, or of doing something difficult by exercising special artistic skills, and not itself merit aesthetic appreciation. Sometimes the selection of an aesthetically pleasing game-move isn't complex or labourious but involves just a flash of insight that this is the right thing to do now. But there the main aesthetic value seems to be in the object chosen, for example in the elegant move, and as much available to a spectator as to the player. If we ask how much aesthetic worth there is in the moment of insight itself, just as a moment of insight, there doesn't seem to be much. Why must seeing beauty itself be beautiful?

Second, the process of selecting a game-move often isn't something you experience. It's a commonplace that the more skilled you become at an activity, the less deliberate or conscious your acts in it tend to be. Someone just learning to drive may listen intently to the engine to decide when to change gears, but an experienced driver makes her changes subconsciously and even without awareness. The same is often true in games. Part of the grace in a shortstop's fielding a ground ball in baseball is the way he positions his body so he can most efficiently do so, but the footwork that leads to that isn't something he does deliberately; it's automatic or subconscious. Some notable athletes, perhaps Larry Bird and Wayne Gretzky, did analyse game situations and choose strategies consciously, as chess players do, but others reacted entirely intuitively and couldn't explain afterward how they came to do what they did. Gayle Sayers, the legendary Chicago Bears running back, said, 'I have no idea what I do. I hear people talk about dead leg, shake, change of pace, but I do things without thinking about them'. He may have experienced the beauty of his swerving runs (the first object), but not the reading of blockers' and tacklers' positions that led him to make them (the second object). Nguyen may be influenced in this part of his view by his experiences rock-climbing and in the many strategy-based board and computer games he has played and discusses, all of which provide separate times to choose your moves before you execute them. But in more continuous game-play, as in baseball or football, the decision-process is often, because it must be, subconscious and not an object of experience. In this play, the appreciation of Nguyen's second aesthetic object can't be a major source of value. (Just as philosophers of art are influenced, sometimes too much, by their favourite novels or paintings, so writers on games can attend specially to the ones they play. Nguyen is young, flexible and hip and does rock-climbing; I'm older and arthritic and play golf.)

At times he identifies this second object, not with the potentially complex process of selecting a game-move, but just with the fact that the choice was correct, or harmonized with your game-situation. Here this harmony is the aesthetic quality you can appreciate, and you can do so even if the process that produced it was hidden from consciousness; even Sayers can recognize that he's making the right running-back move. But we can again ask how much aesthetic quality there is in the bare fact that a game-decision, considered apart from what came before or after it, harmonized with its context, and to me the

answer is ‘not that much’. If we set aside any beauty in the act you chose and in the process of selecting it, how much of aesthetic worth is left? We seem well short of that in the Beethoven or Larkin.

In addition, this type of harmony is far too promiscuously available. If a novice rock-climber correctly chooses the right moves in an easy climb, there’s as much ‘harmony’ between his choices and their context as when an expert chooses correctly in a vastly more difficult climb. As far as correctness goes, the two are equivalent. But it’s surely contrary to the everyday valuing of game-play to find no more value in an expert’s climb than in a novice’s.

Many of these difficulties arise equally for Nguyen’s third aesthetic object, which he suggests is the most important and the greatest source of the value in game-play. It also involves harmony, but now between your abilities and the challenges a game poses; it’s present when you need all those abilities, and all the effort you can muster, to succeed in a game. The sense of performing actions ‘right at the limit of one’s capacities’, he writes, ‘is a particularly profound experience of harmony between self and world’ (110). Enjoying that sense, or feeling yourself stretched as far as you can be, is for him a prime benefit of playing games.

The view that values difficult achievements finds much to commend in activities that give you this sense. If you’re working at the limit of your abilities you’re doing the most difficult thing you can, and so maximizing the value of difficulty. You’re also, through your effort, showing dedication to the pursuit of difficulty, which is a further good. But if we ask how much strictly aesthetic value there is in this harmony, considered apart from any such value in the items it’s harmony between, I again don’t see a great deal. What’s specifically beautiful in the fact that you’re doing all you can, or are being forced to do all you can? And this value is again far too promiscuously available. If the novice needs all his ability and energy to do an easy climb, there’s as much harmony between his ‘self and world’ as when an expert does a more difficult climb at the limit of his abilities, and therefore just as much of this third type of value. But surely both climbers will value the expert’s climb far more highly. Moreover, on Nguyen’s view, the novice has no reason, at least in terms of this value, to develop his abilities or try to become a better climber. No matter how skilled he becomes, he can never work at more than the limit of the abilities he then has, and therefore never achieve more of this harmony-value than he now can. So why bother improving? That’s again contrary to the everyday valuing of game-play, which absolutely commends practice and skill development. These problematic implications don’t follow from valuing the experience of Nguyen’s first aesthetic object, since the expert climber or chess player makes more graceful or elegant moves than a novice. But the experience of that object isn’t specially available to players as against spectators. While the experience of being stretched may be mostly restricted to players, a view that values that can’t say expert play is more valuable than beginner play or that beginners should try to improve their skills.

We can also ask how much this latter harmony actually is experienced, or is an object of awareness. Imagine that Kawhi Leonard is about to take a buzzer-beating basketball shot that, if it goes in, will win a game and playoff series and possibly (in fact actually) lead to a National Basketball Association championship. His attention is riveted on the rim he needs to put the ball just beyond and on the outstretched defender's hand that requires a more highly arced shot than he would normally take. Is there room in his mind for noticing and appreciating that he's operating at the limit of his abilities and so in harmony with the world? Surely not; even slight attention to that could make him miss his shot. Nor can he attend to the correctness of his choice about the shot he's about to take or to any elegance in the act of taking it; those too would be distractions. It has to be just the rim and the defender's hand.

Nguyen's idea of 'agential fluidity' means that, when playing a game, we can take on and care about an end we have little or no interest in outside the game. This is fluidity across time, or at different moments, and he's right to emphasize its role in making game-play possible. But he sometimes suggests that we can also have these different attitudes at the same time. Our agency can be 'layered' (119), with an inner layer that's absorbed in the game we're playing while, simultaneously, an outer layer reflects aesthetically on what that inner layer is doing. This is a very different idea, and may be possible in desultory or relatively easy play, which doesn't require your full attention. But it's much harder to imagine in the all-out straining, using all your ability play that Nguyen says he values most. How do the demands of that state allow any simultaneous, higher-level reflection? How is that reflection possible even in more moderately challenging activities that nonetheless likewise require your full attention? Even there it could make your activity misfire.

What instead is possible, and may be common, is aesthetic appreciation of an activity and the stretching it involved after it's done. And games where you alternate between times of choosing and times of executing moves, such as rock-climbing and many strategy-centred board games, also give you time to reflect on a past activity's aesthetic qualities; this activity can even be just past, so the reflection follows immediately afterward. But there's still a crucial difference between this and the appreciation of aesthetic qualities in art. No one, I take it, would say the most valuable part of listening to a Beethoven sonata comes after the music has ended, when you recall the experience in memory. It comes during your first-level, direct engagement with the music. If aesthetic appreciation of serious game-agency happens only or mainly after the agency is done, that's very different and to me less valuable. It's not a matter of appreciating an aesthetic object while it's vividly present to your mind but only of doing so later, through the more pallid medium of memory.

I've raised a series of difficulties for Nguyen's argument that aesthetic experiences of his three kinds give game-play a large and even the major part of its value. Some concern how much aesthetic value his proposed objects of experience really have, especially in comparison with works of art. Even if some such

value is present, is it enough to account for the substantial value many of us think skilled game-play has? Others question whether these objects really are experienced all that often, given how many game-moves are, and at the highest levels must be, subconscious, and how often attention to the aesthetic quality of one's activity would be distracting. And some argue that his last two aesthetic values are too widely available, since they can be present as much in novice as in expert play. None of these difficulties face the rival view that values skilled game-play mainly under the heading of achievement, or for doing something difficult. Game-moves can be difficult without being beautiful, for example in weightlifting, and even when they are beautiful, they can be more difficult than beautiful, so they gain more value from their success in meeting a challenge than from anything aesthetic. They can also be difficult though they're done subconsciously or without awareness, like Sayers's runs. And an expert's moves, though no more correct in his situation than a novice's or more demanding of all his ability, can be more difficult, for example because they're more complex and precise, and on that basis more valuable. The aesthetic experiences game-play allows may be indeed be a good-making feature and give you an additional reason to engage in it, but they can't, I've argued, be the main or most important source of its value.

I close with a final, related point. Nguyen's chief values in game-play are all ones of experience, more specifically of aesthetic experience but nonetheless of experience more generally. And it's well known that you can have the inner experience as of an activity without actually engaging in it, so it feels just as if you're doing something when in reality you're not; Robert Nozick's fantasy of an 'experience machine' is the best-known illustration of this possibility. So imagine that by electrically stimulating your brain this machine gives you all the inner experiences of climbing a difficult rock face or winning an NBA championship while you're actually sitting motionless in the machine. Your experiences can include all the aesthetic ones Nguyen describes: of individual elegant moves up the rock face or of game-winning basketball shots; of the processes of selecting these, whether by elaborate reasoning or in flashes of insight; and of being stretched and challenged to the limit of your abilities. If he was right that the aesthetic experiences game-play affords give it much of its value, your state on the machine would have much the same value as if you were actually climbing or winning the title. But surely that's not true; your state on the machine has nothing like the same value. This isn't because your experiences on the machine are seriously lacking in aesthetic terms. Their objects have the same aesthetic qualities as if they were real, and it's not in general significantly less good to take pleasure in merely imagined than in physically real beauty. But your overall state has much less value, I would say, than if you were actually climbing the rock face or winning the basketball championship. That's because you're not really meeting the challenges, or

really having the difficult achievements, that give serious game-play most of its value.

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## Sculpted Agency and the Messiness of the Landscape

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In *Games: Agency as Art* (2020), Thi Nguyen has given us a deep and compelling picture of agency as much more layered, volatile, environment-dependent and discontinuous than it appears in most philosophical accounts. Games ‘inscribe . . . forms of agency into artifactual vessels’ (1).<sup>1</sup> When we play a game, we take up a form of agency, including a set of motivations, values and goals, which has been artificially provided by the game. Our purpose in playing, in the kinds of gameplay that interest Nguyen, is to have the aesthetic experience of first-personally exercising the kind of agency sculpted by the game. As we move in and out of gameplay, we take up and drop values, motives, and goals that are provided to us by the game. Games can expand our autonomy and the richness of life by allowing us to practice different forms of agency, taking on different ends for the aesthetic experience of

1 All page numbers unless otherwise noted refer to [Nguyen 2020](#).