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Fun and (striving) games: playfulness and agential fluidity

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KEYWORDS Play; striving play; fun; games; aesthetics

Games: Agency as Art is wonderful, and in my opinion the most important book in the philosophy of games since Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper*. In effect, Nguyen takes Suits' idea of 'reverse English', develops it into a full-blown theory of 'striving play' and then runs with it. And boy does he run with it! The concept of striving play in Nguyen's hands turns out to be incredibly powerful. By shining a light on the distinctive aesthetics of agency, it avoids assimilating the aesthetics of games to more familiar aesthetic values. It helps explain how games can enhance our autonomy, provide relief from morality, transform competition into cooperation and illuminates some of the dangers of 'gamification'. Because I think Nguyen's approach is fundamentally right-headed, I will not try to refute his theory or pick various nits about the details. Rather, my aim is to help build and enhance the theory. Nguyen's book paints an impressive mosaic, but he omitted one crucial element: playfulness. Incorporating the idea of the 'playful stance' into Nguyen's theory promises to resolve three otherwise troubling tensions. I begin by laying out the three tensions (section 1), then introduce the idea of playfulness (section 2) and explain how this idea can mitigate these tensions (section 3).

Three tensions

The three tensions laid out in this section have a common source in the way in which striving play can be intensely immersive, narrowly focused and goal-oriented. The first tension is between striving play and aesthetic appreciation of it. Nguyen himself does an excellent job of laying out this tension, which arises between the apparent need for a disinterested attitude and the intensely practical, focused and hence 'interested' attitude associated with striving

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play. The idea that aesthetic appreciation requires a disinterested attitude is usually traced to Kant, but the idea is unfortunately multiply ambiguous. We can, however, leave delicate issues of Kant scholarship to one side here and rely instead on Nguyen's own account of the relevant notion of disinterest.

Nguyen endorses Bence Nanay's account of aesthetic experience, which he considers an improvement on a similar view developed by Jerome Stolnitz, suggesting that Nanay's account overcomes some objections from Dickie 'in a convincing way' (Nguyen 2020, 118, n10). I cannot do justice to Nanay's account here, but the core idea is that a paradigmatic form of aesthetic experience is constituted by a specific pattern of attention. In this sort of aesthetic experience, our attention is *focused with regards to objects*, but *distributed with regards to properties* (Nanay 2016, 24). Consider the aesthetic appreciation of a landscape. Here your attention is *focused* on the landscape, but your attention is *distributed* with regards to the properties of the landscape, taking in many of its properties at once. Nanay suggests that this synoptic vision captures 'the original Kantian importance of disinterest in our aesthetic experiences' (Nanay 2016, 26). Whenever we have some practical end in view, we will tend to focus our attention on properties relevant to our end. If, I were to view the landscape with an eye to making a hasty escape then I would focus on the paths and where they lead rather than the majestic hills. Aesthetic experience is thus *unfocused and unfiltered (by practical interests)*.

How is this in tension with striving play in Nguyen's sense? In striving play, although we may not reflectively consider our end valuable, we do really pursue it. In striving play we therefore impose a practical filter on our attention. We attend to what will help us win: 'I do not focus on the look or odour of my Chess pieces' (Nguyen 2020, 118). Since our attention is focused and practically filtered, it is incompatible with the sort of disinterest essential for the kinds of experiences apparently essential for aesthetic experience. Hence the tension between striving play and aesthetic appreciation of our agency.

Nguyen suggest that we can mitigate this tension by shifting perspectives – we 'zoom in' and 'zoom out' (Nguyen 2020, 117–119). The emerging picture is one on which our aesthetic experience of our agency will often be retrospective, as we imaginatively *remember* what it was like to find just the right foothold when climbing that rock. This is not an ideal resolution of the tension. It puts too much distance between the actual experiences and one's aesthetic appreciation of them. What if my memory is poor? I will not remember just what it was like when I found that nice chess combination, everything that went through my head. Moreover, memory, even when reliable, tends to be less vivacious and vibrant than an immediate second-order experience had simultaneously with one's practical activity.

A second tension arises between the goods of some forms of 'gamification' and the rich structure of any plausible conception of our real-world values.

This is what Nguyen calls the problem of ‘value capture’. Gamification brings game-like feature to practical situations and uses their motivational power to encourage people to engage in desirable but unpleasant behaviour when they might otherwise lack sufficient motivation to get the job done. The behaviour can be good for the agent, as with fitness devices like ‘fitbit’. Nguyen argues that the very features that make striving play valuable in the context of proper games makes it dangerous in the context of gamification. In the real world our values are and should be rich and subtle. However, one of the attractions of games is that they provide very clear-cut goals – checkmate, scoring more baskets, etc. The ‘value capture’ worry is that more simplistic value schemes will displace our more rich, subtle value schemes in the real world. Number of steps taken will displace a more plausible conception of fitness, for example. Further, our values are not pre-established, and a gamified life may dispose us to endorse simpler values. Moreover, the very reasons gamified systems are motivationally efficacious also make the values they embed ‘sticky’. The game-like pleasures of achievement, ‘levelling up’ can be habit-forming or even addictive, displacing our better judgment. We also suffer from ‘heuristic drift’ – when we treat something as a useful heuristic for long enough we can come to treat it as an end in itself.

A third tension arises between striving play (and game play more generally) on the one hand and autonomy on the other. Nguyen argues that striving play can *enhance* our autonomy by making possible forms of activity which otherwise are impossible. Without the rules of chess, we cannot castle or execute the bishop and knight checkmate. He argues against those who think that games inherently limit our autonomy by imposing rules. Moreover, if we play a variety of kinds of games then we can become skilled in a variety of forms of agency and skilled in fluidly moving between them in our real lives in ways that enhance autonomy.

In arguing that striving play can enhance our autonomy, Nguyen criticizes Miguel Sicart, who thinks that we find true freedom only outside the limitations of rules, including game rules. Sicart’s view seems to be that we find real freedom only in *unstructured* play – play that is ‘carnavalesque and appropriate’ (Nguyen 2020, 74). Nguyen offers a compelling rejoinder to Sicart by emphasizing the ways in which the rules of games make possible whole forms of agency that would otherwise forever elude us, and this in itself significantly enhances our autonomy. Even so, there seems to be something in Sicart’s view that is worth preserving. Striving play as such can easily become obsessive in ways that threaten their autonomy. Consider, e.g., McGonigal’s discussion of David Sudnow’s total immersion in the old Atari videogame, *Breakout*:

As Sudnow put it, ‘Here’s all the motivation you’d ever want ... and the prize seemed to be just holding on’. The game completely sustained his attention,

even when he wasn't in front of the Atari console. 'When I wasn't at the TV, I was practicing the sequence in my imagination, walking down the street, sitting in a café twirling a salt shaker, looking up during dinner in a Japanese restaurant at a bamboo and rice paper trellis with *Breakout*-like rectangles on the ceiling ... just waiting to get back to the game'. (McGonigal 2012, 40)

McGonigal herself seems strangely oblivious to the impoverishment of Sudnow's autonomy, but most readers will see this at least partly as a cautionary tale. An inspiration for the account defended here is that a more playful approach might help with this. Sicart goes too far in insisting on *unstructured* play, but he is onto something in suggesting that we need to remain playful to preserve our autonomy.

The playful stance

In filling out his view, Nguyen lays out three stances:

- (1) The *play stance*, in which one is actively playing a game.
- (2) The *spectator stance*, in which one surveys a game or part of a game.
- (3) The *design stance*, in which one attends to the design of the game itself – its rules, goals, graphics, pieces, how they cohere, what sort of play they enable, etc.

Nguyen's theory would benefit from the inclusion of a fourth stance:

- (1) The *playful stance*, in which one is poised for playful activity.

Superficially, the playful stance might seem redundant with the play stance, but it is not. In Nguyen's sense, the 'play stance' is to do with playing *games*. One can be playing a game without thereby being *playful*. More generally, there is a sense of 'play' in which playing neither entails nor is entailed by playing a game. A child frolicking on a hill is playing, as we might say, 'full-stop', but not playing a game. A jaded footballer who is in it just for the money and reputation is still playing a game when he plays football, but he is not playing full-stop any more. He has lost his love of the game, and is no longer playful. Similarly, someone who is very intensely focused on their immediate goal can be playing a game without thereby being the least bit playful. On the one hand, one can play a game, play a joke on someone, play the guitar or play someone for a fool. On the other hand, one can simply play, without playing anything; one can play full-stop. When one plays full-stop, one's behaviour is animated by a playful spirit. It is this notion of playfulness that figures in the 'playful stance'. To avoid confusion, we might usefully relabel Nguyen's 'play stance' as the 'gaming stance'. In what, though, do play full-stop and playfulness consist? I have explored this topic in depth

elsewhere (see Ridge [forthcoming](#)), but I cannot go into all the details of that theory here. I will, however, touch on some of the core ideas.

Here is my view of play full-stop:

An agent is playing [full-stop] just in case the agent is engaged in unscripted activity for the fun of it.

An activity is scripted to the extent that the agent's behaviour is fixed by some pre-existing 'script'. Being scripted comes in multiple forms. An action done entirely by following a rule which fixes one's behaviour throughout the activity is scripted. Someone working on an assembly line who follows simple rules for combining parts is following a script. The behaviour of an animal whose activity is entirely fixed by instinct is scripted; here the instinct is the script. An action done out of strict moral principle is scripted. To be unscripted is simply not to be scripted. One important worry for present purposes is that being unscripted might seem to preclude playing games of any kind, since games have rules and these could be understood as a kind of 'script'. However, one can be playful without being open to absolutely anything like the *Joker* from *Batman*. Two points are essential here. First: simply being rule-governed does not mean one's behaviour is *entirely* fixed by rules. Plausibly, play is implicitly a *graded* concept – to play is to be playful to a sufficient degree, where 'sufficient' is fixed by a context of utterance. While rules exclude certain choices, they typically leave discretion. The more discretion they leave, *ceteris paribus*, the less scripted the behaviour and thus the more scope for play.

Second: To constitute a 'script' a rule or set of rules must have certain further features. The rule or set of rules must either be (a) externally imposed, e.g. by coercion or hardwired biological instinct, or (b) taken by the agent to be binding in some way, as with moral norms, a sense of propriety, professional duty, etiquette, etc. So a rule one chooses for oneself and which one takes not to be binding – that is, which one takes it to be permissible to abandon on a mere fleeting whim – does not constitute a 'script' in the intended sense. So many of the rules governing play will not constitute a script precisely because the rules are not considered binding. Of course, when people play together there can be a tacit social contract. In a multi-player game no individual can permissibly abandon the agreed rules on a whim, at least not in the sense of violating – though one may of course resign and just quit playing (sometimes this will spoil the game for the others, though). Still all of those playing *together* can abandon those rules if all (or enough) of them 'just feel like it'. This differs from moral and legal obligations; there is a sense in which the group agent can still abandon the rules on a whim. This, incidentally, is why play full-stop is not the same as *unstructured* play. Play full-stop can be unstructured, but it needn't be. Sicart's emphasis

on unstructured play is onto something because unstructured play is always play full-stop, but mistaken because the entailment does not go both ways.

What about doing something 'for the fun of it'? It is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing something 'for the fun of it' that one self-consciously sets oneself the aim of having some fun, judges that a given activity will be fun, and does it for that reason. Doing something 'for the fun of it' in the intended sense should instead be understood in terms of the behaviour actually being fun, where the fun *reinforces* the behaviour. This of course, leads naturally to the question of just what *fun* is, though. In my view (which I cannot properly defend here), fun is a homeostatic cluster of affective/motivational/perceptual states. These states are themselves characteristically caused by certain sorts of inputs. Having fun is a state with the following functional profile:

Characteristic inputs:

- (a) A perception that one's environment is safe and a general sense of satiety/satisfaction
- (b) A lack of anxiety
- (c) Perception of some aspect of one's environment as incongruous in some way, perhaps especially but not exclusively in seeing something novel in the mundane

Characteristic outputs:

- (a) Enjoyment of the aspect of one's environment that one finds incongruous, etc.
- (b) A tendency to 'lose oneself' in the phenomenon, to lose track of time and more mundane matters
- (c) Amusement, laughter, etc.
- (d) The inhibition of more negative emotions
- (e) Positive forms of arousal
- (f) An increase in openness to one's environment – a broadening of perspective which in turn may prime one for creativity

What unifies the seemingly disparate elements of this functional package is, roughly, that fun functions to motivate *experimental behaviour in safe environments*. No element in this cluster may be essential to a given instance counting as fun. However, there must be enough of the general 'package' picked out by this homeostatic cluster for something to count as fun. This way of defining 'fun' helps clarify why play and fun are made for one another. Play is *unscripted* precisely because the point of play is to seek out something *novel*, while having fun is paradigmatically a matter of seeing something as novel.

Closely related: play *broadens our perspective*. Having fun differs from more negative feelings like fear and disgust, in that it does not program for a specific behavioural response (e.g. fear programs for flight). Barbara Fredrickson argues that this is a general feature of positive emotions. Because positive emotions are not responses to problems, they do not cue behaviours specifically for solving a problem. Rather, positive emotions serve to broaden a creature's 'thought-action repertoire', where this enhances the creature's long-term fitness by developing more flexible strategies. Whereas a perceived threat *narrows* one's perspective, the perception of safety can *broaden* one's perspective and encourage the agent to 'discard time-tested or automatic (everyday) behavioural scripts and to pursue novel, creative, and often *unscripted* paths of thought and action' (Fredrickson 1998, 5, emphasis added). When we are playful, we take in more of our situation, and in particular notice new affordances – opportunities for action – in light of features of the situation we might have missed with a narrower perspective, and this in turn helps us find creative new solutions. This highlights a contrast between certain intense pleasures (orgasm, heroin high) which narrow our focus and fun, which broadens it.

Lightening up: having fun and resolving the tensions

The playful stance enriches Nguyen's theory quite apart from helping resolve the tensions, simply because play and fun plausibly are good for their own sake and one of the main reasons we play games. Nguyen himself mentions fun in passing as the point of most 'stupid games', but they are also important to party games that are not stupid games in his technical sense, many informal card and board games and even many of the so-called 'heavy strategy games' Nguyen mentions. In fact, *pure* striving play is much easier in 'stupid games' like Bag on Your Head precisely because they encourage a relaxed, playful attitude. By contrast with more serious competitive games like chess, it is much harder not to become invested in the outcome so that we at best have a hybrid form of game play, with elements of both achievement play and striving play.¹ In what follows, I focus on chess as a test case, both because most people are familiar with it and because its intensity might seem to make it especially inhospitable to 'the playful stance'.

Nguyen argued that our practical interest when engaged in striving play tends to make our second-order perceptions skew towards the practically relevant. One problem with this argument is that we often do not know, in advance, precisely which features *are* practically relevant. To that extent, it is trivial to filter out the 'irrelevant' features in advance. Granted, some features can be safely ignored, like the smell of the chess pieces, but this level of 'filtration' need not mean one's experience cannot be aesthetic. Focus comes in degrees. If I am focused on precisely *one* property then my experience is

maximally focused and presumably non-aesthetic. However, surely my perception need not be so capacious as to focus on *every* property of the object of experience to be aesthetic. Indeed, depending on how liberal we are with properties, such a capacious ‘focus’ may typically be impossible for creatures like us. So long as we are focusing on several properties of the object and not just one, our experience could to that extent be aesthetic. Often there will be a proper subset of all the properties of the object of experience which are candidates for being practically relevant, only some of which merit our attention. Crucially, we often cannot know until we *look*.

Of course, if aesthetic experience requires that we impose *no* practical filter of any kind on our experience then the mere fact that focus comes in degrees will not help resolve the tension between striving play and aesthetic experience. It is here, though, that an interesting possibility arises. We might take up a genuinely disinterested perspective for the sake of a *second-order* practical interest. Although not quite literally striving play, this indirection involves a kind of agential fluidity which is similar in spirit. We might notice things which we will immediately recognize as practically relevant even though our perspective is disinterested right up until the moment of our epiphany. For example, I might canvass a ‘Where’s Wally?’ image in a disinterested way with the not unreasonable hope that if my eyes happened to pass over Wally that this would jump out at me even as I lazily scan the page. An experienced chess player might take a similar approach to the position in front of them.

Taking up a more disinterested perspective will not be trivial for earnest striving players. It is all too easy in the ‘heat of battle’ to become obsessed with one idea and fall into tunnel vision. In chess, this characteristically happens when the player finds a very nice idea and becomes convinced it just *must* work. The player then spends enormous amounts of time trying to *make* it work when at some point they should instead have realized that the move just gone back to the drawing board to find more candidate moves. What they need is the ability to shift perspectives from a calculative mode into a more imaginative mode, where the latter could be enhanced by a more disinterested survey of the position – the ‘Where’s Wally’ approach to finding ideas/moves. Crucially, the playful stance is the *perfect* antidote to tunnel vision. Recall that playfulness *functions to encourage experimentation and new ideas*. Moreover, playfulness achieves this function by giving us a *broader and more wide-ranging perspective*.

One might object that while playfulness enables a kind of aesthetic experience in games, it is not the right kind of aesthetic experience. For Nguyen, it is crucial that the appropriate object of aesthetic experience, at least those truly distinctive of games, is our *agency*. What my playful chess player aesthetically surveys, it seems, is not their own agency, but ‘the position’ or ‘their situation’. This contrast is easily overdrawn, though. When an experienced chess player surveys a position, they do not see it

primarily in terms of the shape or color of the pieces, but instead in terms of its *affordances* – its possible moves – a point Nguyen himself makes (Nguyen 2020, 138). Seeing a position is therefore seeing a set of opportunities for one's agency, which is not a million miles from experiencing one's own actual agency. Moreover, even if it is not technically the aesthetics of agency in Nguyen's sense, it is a form of aesthetic experience very distinctive of playing games. A chess player will appreciate a position aesthetically in a very different way from someone who does not know the rules of the game, and their appreciation will be very 'agential' in the sense of seeing it in terms of the potential *moves* hidden within it.

However, we can do better than this. When playing a game of chess and entering a playful mode, the player will pivot from the position in front of them to a series of *possible* moves. They can then take a disinterested attitude to each of those possible moves, playfully taking in an unfocused way all the features of the move – what lines of attack it opens up, what pieces it threatens, what weaknesses it leaves behind, what new affordances it provides the opponent. This is a very cerebral form of unfocused attention, but it is unfocused attention all the same. Moreover, it is unfocused attention to a possible move as represented in the player's imagination. This, though, *is* a form of agency – mental agency – by the player. Moving a piece 'in your head' is a species of agency just as much as moving it on a physical board, and it had better be given the possibility of blindfold chess. This sort of unfocused experience of one's mental agency, then can generate aesthetic enjoyment of possible moves – of their harmony and elegance, of the surprising ideas they contain, even of their hilarity in some cases. Insofar as playfulness helps us achieve this, it enhances the aesthetics of agency during one's striving play.

What of the second tension: between striving play (especially in worthwhile forms of gamification) and preserving a rich and subtle set of values in the real world? How can the playful stance help us avoid the 'stickiness' of the simplistic values embedded in gamification? As Nguyen urges, what we really need to avoid value capture is the ability to keep things in perspective. We need to 'dip in and out' (Nguyen 2020, 224) of different agencies so we do not lose track of what is important. However, this is easier said than done, given the motivational power of striving play – recall again the obsessiveness of Sudnow regarding *Breakout*. The playful stance is perfect for helping us keep perspective. First, the playful person has a *broader perspective*. This is one of the functions of playfulness – it makes us take a step back and have a broader, more synoptic perspective. This act of reflection can remind us of why we are engaged in the activity in the first place. It can therefore remind us that, for example, steps on our Fitbit are just a heuristic, and what we really value is our health.

Second, playfulness requires a sense of *safety* and a *lack of anxiety* – these are among the input states in the functional account of having fun I offered in section 2. This serenity and sense of safety is not automatic, though. What sort of player can maintain such an even keel in the heat of battle? One who takes a broader perspective on the real point of their activity and its role in their life. When stressing out because you might lose their game, the playful competitor will say to themselves, ‘it is just a game’, or ‘the important thing is to play well and learn something from my mistakes’, or simply ‘just enjoy the process’. These thoughts, though, exemplify just the kind of reflective perspective one needs to avoid value capture. The playful stance, then, encourages reflection of the right kind simply because without it one will be too anxious and feel too unsafe to remain playful. The virtue of playfulness can be cultivated, and we cultivate it in part by learning to keep things in perspective.

What, finally, of the third tension: between playing games and autonomy? To some extent, this tension arose because of the problems associated with value capture and its erosion of the reasons-responsiveness that partly constitutes autonomy on some theories. I have already explained how playfulness provides an antidote to that problem. Playfulness also bolsters the mechanism by which striving play enhances our autonomy on Nguyen’s account. Nguyen’s idea is that playing a variety of games gives us a library of agencies, and this gives us more options in real life. For this to enhance our autonomy effectively, though, we need to be motivated to move fluidly between agencies in light of what makes most sense in our circumstances. This agential fluidity is enhanced by playfulness. Being playful means experimenting with new approaches, which can mean new agencies in a familiar situation, e.g. bringing some of the forms of agency developed in playing chess to the practice of philosophy. Someone who is more playful will be more imaginative and more open to these opportunities to ‘try on’ new agencies.

However, playfulness contributes to our freedom and autonomy in a more direct way. The primary function of play is to encourage *experimentation* – to try something new. The playful chess player will not simply opt to grind out a technical win, repeating ideas that have been deployed over and over – at least, they will not automatically do this. They will instead scan the position to look for new ideas. Because play encourages experimentation, they will look for ways to ‘break the rules’ – here not the constitutive rules (they aren’t cheaters!) but the strategic rules of thumb that inform their play, e.g. ‘a knight on the rim is dim’. Playfulness is thus transgressive and generates an exhilarating sense of freedom.

Conclusion

Nguyen comes tantalizingly close to a solution like mine to the three tensions in the final paragraph of his book:

Often associated with the notion of 'play' are the qualities of lightness, unseriousness, changeability. And there is a sense in which the suggestions I've made about striving play fit with that notion. When we are involved in striving play, especially aesthetic striving play, we are learning to wear our agency lightly. We are learning not to be stuck in a certain practical frame of mind, not too attached to certain clear goals. We [are] learning to dip in and out, to devote ourselves and then to pull back. We are learning to play around with our own practical attitudes. We are learning to be more light-footed with our way of being in the practical world. (Nguyen 2020, 224)

Here Nguyen is very close to the ideas embodied in the playful stance but does not quite 'go there'. In a way, my main point in this paper is that striving play *as such* is not sufficient for the sort of light-footedness Nguyen celebrates here. Striving play is compatible with obsessiveness, tunnel vision and wearing one's (sub-)agency heavily. If, however, we combine striving play with play full-stop then we can have the best of both worlds.

Note

1. I explore this theme at length and argue that some ideas from Stoicism can help provide a more realistic ideal of game play for earnest competitors in Ridge (2021).

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