

Games: Agency as Art

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Chapter 1 - Agency as Art

Games can do something quite special for us, and to us. Games can operate by offering us the opportunity to temporarily manipulate basic features of our own agency. When we play games, we can adopt new abilities and new ends. We become, for a moment, something like a different agent. And game designers design core parts of those alternative agencies. Some have said that game designers design worlds — that they design environments and locations, with their own histories and causal mechanisms. But this, I think, sells game designers short. The game designer also designs the agent who will operate within that world. They tell us what our abilities will be, what obstacles we will face, and most importantly, what our goals will be in the game. They design the outlines of who we will be in the game, and we players step in and fill out that outline.

And the fact that players can adopt and submerge themselves in these alternate agencies reveals something rather astonishing about the fluidity of human agency. This is not true for all game play. Some game play is quite motivationally straightforward — if I play poker for money, then my in-game goals and my extra-game goals align. I want to win, because winning will make me money. But I can also play a game, not to win, but just for the experience of struggling to win. I might find such an experience enrapturing or mentally cleansing — or even beautiful. But in order to play games for the experience of struggling, we must be capable of doing something quite motivationally peculiar. We take up goals, not because we actually care about them, but because temporarily caring about them will yield some valuable

experience. We must be able to induce ourselves a temporary sort of caring, and submerge ourselves within it for a time.

Consider what is, to my mind, a leading candidate for artful game design: *Sign*, a product of the avant-garde wing of role-playing games (Hymes and Seyalioglu 2015). It's a live-action role playing game about inventing language. The game is based on a true story. In the 1970s, Nicaragua had no sign language; deaf children were deeply isolated. Eventually, the government brought together deaf children from across the country to form an experimental school, with the goal of teaching those children to lip read. Instead, the children collectively and spontaneously invented their own sign language. In *Sign*, the players each take on the role of one of those students. The game assigns each player a backstory and an inner truth that they deeply need to communicate. For example, "I'm afraid one day I'll be like my parents," and "I'm afraid [my cat] Whiskers thinks I've left her." The game is played in total silence. The only way to communicate is through those signs invented by the players during the game. There are three rounds. In each round, every player invents a single sign and teaches it to the others; then all players attempt to have a freeform conversation, desperately struggling to communicate with their tiny inventory of signs. Invented signs get used and modified; new signs evolve spontaneously from old signs. Communication happens painfully and slowly, with the occasional rare and luminous breakthrough. And there's one more rule: every time you feel that you are misunderstood, or do not understand somebody else, you must take a marker and make a "compromise mark" on your hand. The experience of the game is utterly marvelous. It is intense, absorbing, frustrating, and surprisingly emotional. But to have that experience, the player must commit, temporarily, to the goal of communicating their particular inner truth; they must absorb themselves in the difficult practical details of communicating inside the severe restrictions of the game.

Here, then, is the particular motivational state of game playing which I wish to investigate. The rules of the game tell us to care about something and we start caring about, for a while at least. A board game instructs us to care about collecting one color of token; a video game tells us to care about stomping on little mushroom people. And, in order to achieve the absorbed state of play that some of us cherish so much, we do it. This is not the case for all games or all players, certainly. The mercenary poker player may simply be interested in getting money in a perfectly straightforward way. But much game playing involves something more motivationally complex.

From a certain perspective, it is precisely this seemingly arbitrary valuation that can make game playing seem so utterly ridiculous. All that time and effort spent, and for what? Chess players burn intellectual energy, not on curing cancer or solving the energy crisis, but on trying to beat each other at an entirely artificial activity. Rock climbers toil and sweat and strain to climb the hard way up a face, when there's often a perfectly easy hike up the back. In various frames of mind, game playing can seem like a complete waste of time, or something even worse — a kind of ego-stroking and an indulgence of our worst impulses. It can seem, to some eyes, like an exercise in adding status, rank, and conquest where it didn't exist, or need to exist.

But games, I will argue, offer us something special, particularly the games in which we do have to take up an arbitrary interest in a designated goal. In those cases, the capacity of the game designer to specify goals and agencies, and the players' capacities to take them up, are precisely what makes games a distinctive art form.¹ The manipulation of goals is central to the

¹ For simplicity's sake, I will speak as if there is a singular game designer, when in actuality, games are often designed in large teams.

art form of agency. Investigating games as the art of agency will teach us, not only about this distinctive art form, but also about the fluidity of our own agency.

Frameworks and approaches

Games have an increasing number of defenders of late. Much of this work has been driven by the rise of video games. Often, a defense takes the form of conceptual assimilation: theorists often defend the value of games by arguing that games are a sub-category of some other, more traditionally legitimated human practice. For example, some have recently defended the worth of games by assimilating them as a sub-category of some other well-established art form. Grant Tavinor has argued that games are a kind of art because they are a kind of fiction (Tavinor 2009). Mary Flanagan has argued that games can be worthwhile as conceptual art, comparing them to avant-garde performance art. She praises what she calls “serious games”, which deliver social and political criticisms (Flanagan 2013). Similarly, Ian Bogost has argued that games can function as a kind of rhetoric, persuading through their ability to simulate causal systems and comment upon them, especially social and economic systems (Bogost 2010). And all these claims are surely right — obviously games can be fictions, can perform political critique, and can persuade. But notice that none of these accounts attribute value via a unique function for games. Under all these analyses, games perform familiar functions using a slightly novel technique.

Elsewhere in the academic analysis of games, we find accounts that avoid any treatment of games as artistic or expressive artifacts. In the philosophy of sport, the value of games is usually characterized in terms of the ability of games to promote and display human skills,

excellence, and achievements.² But notice, again, that this makes out games to be valuable in a very familiar way. Tom Hurka, for example, argues that games are intrinsically valuable because of the difficult achievements they can offer their players. But difficulty, of course, is not unique to games. So, says Hurka, non-game activities can be even more valuable, because they can be difficult *and* their ends can be worthwhile (Hurka 2006). If your options are chess or working on new medical technologies and both are equally difficult, then it is certainly better to do the medical work. If the value of games is simply in the difficulty of their achievements — well, that’s something we can find elsewhere in the practical world, while also doing something of greater use to humanity. Games might truly come into their own for Hurka once we’ve solved all our practical problems, in some magical techno-futurist Utopia. But in the meantime, you’re better off doing something both difficult and useful with your life.

All of these analyses give accounts by which games are valuable, but none of them give an account by which games are valuable in any special sort of way. Of course, that might just be the end of the matter — games might turn out to be just another way to achieve some familiar values. But I think we can say more. And one way to say more is to think about the ways in which games are a distinctive art form which offers its own special kind of artistic value. They are distinct from the other arts because they engage with human practicality — with our ability to decide and do. And they are distinct from other kinds of practical engagement precisely because they are an art — because the circumstances of practical engagement are creatively reconfigured by somebody who plays a role very much like a traditional sort of artist. In the end, the very thing that might make games seem like a lesser human activity — the arbitrariness of the in-game goals — turns out to be exactly what makes them a workable medium for the artist.

² I consider these various views from the philosophy of sport at length in Chapter 10.

Games values are extremely different from ordinary values. Our values, in ordinary life, are largely recalcitrant. For most of us, there are something like universal values; unless we are radical nihilists, we accept the value of life, freedom, happiness for all. These things are genuinely and enduringly important, and we can't really change that. Even when we move from universal values to our own peculiar personal values, there's typically little flex, especially in the short term. I care about rigor, creativity, and irony, and it'll be a hell of a time to change any of that stuff. The ordinary practical activities of non-game life occur within the relatively inflexible constraints of these enduring values. But game activity is different. In games, we can change our in-game values; we can change the aims which guide our actions for the duration of the game. We can take on temporary agencies — temporary sets of abilities and constraints, along with temporary ends.

In an earlier iteration of this work, I used two ruling analogies: that the game designer was doing something quite similar to an urban designer or architect; and that the game designer was doing something similar to government design. In all these cases, designers seek to create an environment of constraints and possibilities through which autonomous agents can move and act. I have come to abandon these analogies, since I think they actually understate the remarkable position of the game designer. In urban design, architecture, and government design, the designer has relatively limited control over the interests and aims of the users for which they are designing. Our interests, in ordinary life, are fairly recalcitrant. But the game designer can be remarkably intrusive in this respect. They can specify, with great creative freedom and precision, the interests and goals of the in-game agents.³ And the

³ Urban planners and architects can over incentives and disincentives, but this isn't the same as designing an agent's ends. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.

very fact that game goals are detached from what's truly or enduringly valuable is precisely what makes them malleable, and available for artistic manipulation.

Suits and striving

The best place to start is Bernard Suits's analysis of games. Let's start with the simple version of his analysis, what Suits calls the "portable version" of his definition: that playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles (Suits 2005, 55). For example: in a marathon, the point isn't simply to get to the finish line. We usually don't actually care about being at that particular point in space, in and of itself. We know because we don't take shortcuts, or a taxi. The point is to get there under certain limitations. Suits contrasts game playing with what he calls 'technical activity' — that is, the ordinary practice of using efficient means to reach an independently valuable end. With game playing, we instead set arbitrary ends for the sake of the means they force us through. Getting a ball through a stupid little basket has no independent value on its own; we take up the goal of making baskets against opposition in order to play basketball. In-game goals usually possess little to no value for us outside the game. I don't go to the basketball court after hours with a ladder and spend hours passing the ball through the hoop; nor do I pull out my *Monopoly* set by myself and glory in how much *Monopoly* money I command. The value of those in-game goals is temporary. I take them up for the sake of making a particular activity possible.

Notice I've only argued for the arbitrariness of in-game goals. We must distinguish carefully here between the *goals* we pursue in the game and the *purpose* we have for playing the game. The possible purposes we might have are many: fun, exercise, therapy, skill-development, drama, achievement, vanquishing our opponents and thrilling in their

humiliation. Suits's view has nothing to say about the relative arbitrariness or resoundingness of those purposes for game play; his definition, in fact, leaves entirely open what our purpose is for playing games in the first place. This is intentional; it must be that the professional game player, the exercising game player, and the game player just out for a little fun are all playing games; otherwise, the account would strain against the basic outlines of the concept.

Suits took himself to be offering a complete account of games and game playing. For this he has been criticized — there are many aspects and types of game playing that do not conform to Suits's theory. Many games — narratively oriented tabletop roleplaying games, like *Fiasco*, and wholly narrative computer games, like *The Stanley Parable* — seem to involve no obstacles at all.⁴ (I provide an extended analysis in (Nguyen d), and summarize the key points in Chapter 2.) I suggest that we follow in the spirit of Roger Caillois and be pluralists of play (Caillois 1961). I think that Suits's analysis offers us, not a complete definition of 'game', but simply an insightful description of one of the forms of game play. However, this topic is still very much under dispute, and I have attempted, for my arguments in this book, to avoid depending on my pluralistic views here. I propose, then, to analyze the category of games that fits the Suitsian definition, which I will call 'Suitsian games'. Some readers will think that the category of Suitsian games encompasses all games; others might take Suitsian games to be only one sub-type among many. I leave a complete accounting of the breadth of my conclusions in the hands of the reader. Even those Wittgensteinians who maintain that the term 'game' is essentially undefinable should be able to find my analysis somewhat palatable, by treating the category of 'Suitsian games' as an artificial stipulation. I am not interested in debating whether or not the category of Suitsian games does or does not match up with some

⁴ Criticism of Suits on this point is a common refrain; see (Upton 2015, 16) for a representative example.

bit of natural language; I am interested in the fact that the category is clearly specified, useful, and obviously applicable to many human activities.

But one might worry that Suitsian play is necessarily immature, or unworthy of serious attention. If one pokes around the recent literature on games, especially those attempting to offer some accounting of games' value and importance, one begins to suspect a certain anxiety about playing to surmount challenges and win. For example, media critic Andrew Darley condemns video games for offering only "surface play" and "direct sensorial stimulation". Says Darley: "Computer games are machine-like: they solicit intense concentration from the player who is caught up in their mechanisms ... leaving little room for reflection other than an instrumental type of thinking that is more or less commensurate with their own workings" (Darley 2000) via (Lopes 2010, 117). The same thought recurs in more sympathetic treatments in the new wave of games scholarship. There, scholars often defend the value of games by pointing out what games can offer us besides instrumental challenges. These defenses often proceed by highlighting games' capacity to represent. Bogost, for example, gives an account of games as rhetoric, highlighting games which make arguments via their ability to simulate the world. John Sharp reserves his highest praise for those games that move beyond the "hermetically sealed" experiences of merely solving the game and towards representing and commenting on the world. Sharp, for example, highlights Flanagan's game *Career Moves* (2000), which resembles certain familiar old family games, such as *The Game of Life* (1960) and *Chutes and Ladders* (1943), but forces the player to make stereotypically gendered career choices for their female character, in order to bring the player to reflect on gender biases in the workplace (Sharp 2015, 77-97). Flanagan herself praises Gonzolo Frasca's game *September 12th: A Toy World*, a pointedly political game in which one plays the United States dropping drone bombs on an unnamed Middle-Eastern locale,

attempting to kill terrorists, only to find that all their efforts only destroy the innocent civilians and increase the number of terrorists (Flanagan 2013, 239-40).

The unifying thought that seems to underlie all these approaches is the presumption that Suitsian play — the play of skills and clearly defined goals — cannot be valuable in the way that traditional art appreciation is valuable. But I think this is wrong. The dismissal arises from a misunderstanding of the motivational structures possible in Suitsian play. Let's start by simply considering the Suitsian account itself. The Suitsian analysis is compatible with a wide range of interests. Again, the portable version: game playing is the voluntary attempt to overcome obstacles. Notice that this definition doesn't require that that we try to overcome obstacles only for the sake of having overcome them. In other words, it doesn't require that winning be the purpose of game playing. The account admits of many different motivations for playing. One might be playing for the sake of winning — either one wants the win for its own sake or for something that follows from winning, like goods and money.⁵ Let's call this *achievement play*. Professional poker players who play for money, Olympic athletes who play for honor, and people who play simply to win are all achievement players. Or one might be playing for the sake of the going through the struggle to win. Let's call that *striving play*. An achievement player plays to win; a striving player acquires, temporarily, an interest in

⁵ It should be noted that "winning" here is slightly imprecise. There are many other sorts of states we can pursue in games. For example, one might have lost the opportunity to actually win in particular chess match, but one can still play on, aiming to achieve a stalemate rather than an outright loss. For another, as Suits points out, many games don't have victory condition, but only loss conditions. For example: a ping pong volley, where we try to keep the ball going as long as possible, has no win condition, only a loss condition, and the goal of the activity is to stave off the loss for as long as possible. Technically, what I should be discussing here is not "winning", but pursuit of the lusory goal, in its various shades and forms. However, I will use the term "winning" loosely, from here on out, to refer to the larger notion of the pursuits of lusory goals, and use the terms "achieving a victory" and "winning proper" to refer to the narrower notion. I do not use the term "success" because I think its natural use is ambiguous between win-related concepts, and our larger purposes for playing a game. My wife will say that the playing of a party game was "successful" if it was fun for all involved, regardless of whether she did well by the internal standard of the game.

winning, for the sake of the struggle. (I defend the possibility of striving play at great length in Chapter 3.) Let's start, though, by noting that striving play is interestingly motivationally inverted. In ordinary practical life, we pursue the means for the sake of the ends. But in striving play, we pursue the ends for the sake of the means. We take up a goal for the sake of the activity of struggling to achieve that goal. This motivational inversion is, in my eyes, the most interesting possibility raised by the Suitsian analysis. The primary purpose of this book is to explore what it means that we can induce such motivational inversions in ourselves, and what it means that game designers have significant control over that inversion.

So, let's focus on striving play. There are many reasons one might be interested in striving play. One could be interested just for the sake of doing something difficult, or for physical fitness or mental health, or for aesthetic qualities of the experience. Perhaps a mundane example will make the category of striving play more plausible. I once took up racquetball with my spouse for the sake of our health. I don't have any particular interest in beating my spouse at racquetball — in fact, it would be rather unpleasant if one of us consistently beat the other. But I can induce in myself a temporary interest in winning for the sake of the health benefits of running around after that ball. But I don't, from the perspective of my enduring self, genuinely care about winning. In fact, given that our purpose is having sufficiently interesting games to keep us healthy, it would actually be a bad thing if I acquired more skill in the game and started winning easily and constantly.

Also, consider the category of what we might call "stupid games". Stupid games have the following characteristics: first, they are only fun if you try to win; and second, the most fun part is when you fail. There are a great many stupid games, including most drinking games, *Twister*, and *Bag On Your Head*. The latter is a party game where everybody puts a brown paper grocery bag on their head and then tries to take off the bags on other people's heads

while stumbling blindly around the room. When somebody takes the bag off your head, you're out. At some point, there is only one person stumbling blindly around the room with a bag still on their head, while everybody else watches, trying to suppress laughter — that lone person, of course, is the winner, and the best part of the game is watching how long it takes them to figure out that they've won. Consider also a game like *Twister*, in which you try to keep in balance as long as you can, but the funniest part is when everybody collapses on top of each other. Finally, recall the children's game of Telephone, which you might have played in your youth. In the game, everybody sits in a circle and tries to send a message around by whispering from one person to the next. The inevitable result is that the original message becomes wildly distorted, much to the merriment of all. The enjoyable part of the game is the failure, but that failure is only funny if all the players are earnestly trying to communicate successfully. In *Twister* and Telephone, to have the desired experience — hilarious failure — one must pursue success, but success isn't the point. Stupid games cannot be properly played by achievement players, but only by striving players. Stupid games make sense only if striving play is possible.

Aesthetic experiences of one's own activity

But stupid games are not the point of our inquiry; they are merely a blunt example to support the possibility of striving play. I'm interested in showing that games can be an art form, so the most natural place to start is with the relationship between game playing and aesthetic experiences. I do not mean to imply that art is exclusively aesthetic; only that one of the characteristic functions of art is to provide aesthetic experiences. I'll consider non-aesthetic theories of art and their relationship to games later in this book. The analysis of the

make-believe, fictional side of game aesthetics is already well underway (Tavinor 2017, 2009; Robson and Meskin 2016). What we lack is an aesthetics of Suitsian play. Thinking the aesthetic experiences of Suitsian game playing will, I think, get us quickly to what's special about game-making and game playing.⁶

So: consider the category of *aesthetic striving play* — that is, game play engaged in for the sake of aesthetic experiences. Can striving experiences be aesthetic, and what would that be like? Rather than go through a laundry list of different aesthetic theories, let's consider some paradigmatically aesthetic properties: those of gracefulness and elegance. We obviously attribute such aesthetic properties to particular playings of games, especially from the spectators' perspective. Chess moves are often described as elegant, or lovely; some players, on the other hand, will be disparaged for playing ugly, albeit effective, games (Osborne 1964). Sports spectatorship is similarly full of aesthetic attributions of athletic beauty and grace (Best 1974; Cordner 1984).

But it would be very strange to think that an athlete who was capable of performing a graceful action, whose aesthetic quality was available to a spectator, would also be unable to experience their own gracefulness for themselves. Barbara Montero argues convincingly that dancers have the best access to the aesthetic qualities of their movements via the internal sense of proprioception (Montero 2006). Similarly, it seems difficult to imagine that a chess player who thought up an elegant move would also be incapable of feeling that elegance for

⁶ My line of argument is somewhat aligned, in spirit, with those scholars who call themselves 'ludologists' and argue that games are a unique category. I differ from them in thinking that certain general notions from the study of artworks can, in fact, be useful. I've offered a general overview of the narratology vs. ludology debate in (Nguyen 2017c). However, my views differ those of the central ludologists in many of the details, which I will discuss throughout the book. The ludologists have, for the most part, not drawn on aesthetic theory; I will hopefully show why they should. My analysis will be grounded in work from analytic aesthetics. For an interestingly parallel account from a non-analytic angle, see Graeme Kirkpatrick's application of continental and critical theoretic approaches to aesthetics of game play (Kirkpatrick 2011).

themselves. Usually a player has an experience of playing: the solution to the chess puzzle strikes one as a bolt out of the blue and one is awed by its beautiful deadliness; a climber finds the right careful balance and feels the gracefulness of their own movements as they slip over the rock.

But the experience of game playing is more than simply spectating one's own public actions from the closest possible seat in the house.⁷ There are distinctive experiences especially available to the causally active game player. These are the experiences of acting, deciding, and solving — of not only appreciating the movement or solution, but originating it, and originating it in response to recalcitrant opposition. And these experiences can be aesthetic. Take another paradigmatically aesthetic property: harmony. When a chess player discovers a gorgeously perfect move that elegantly escapes a trap while simultaneously pressuring their opponent, the harmony of the move — the elegant fit between the challenge and the solution — is available both to themselves and to outsiders. But something more is available especially to the player: a special experience of harmony, of a fit between one's awareness, one's problem-solving and decision-making capacities, and the elegance of the output. It's not just that the solution fits the situation; it's that one's abilities fit the demands of the situation in being capable of generating that solution. When one's abilities precisely match the challenges, when one's mind or body is just barely able to do what's required, when one's abilities are just right to cope with the situation at hand — that is an experience of harmony that is only available to the player themselves, a harmony between self and challenge — a harmony of causal efficacy — between the practical self and the obstacles of its world.

⁷ I will assume here that we access the aesthetic through experience, and that aesthetic artworks function by providing or fostering aesthetic experiences in their audiences and appreciators. I am fairly confident, however, that the account I give can easily be adapted to most other theories of the aesthetic.

Consider the difference between two superficially similar activities: dancing freely and rock climbing. Dancing freely — as I do, for example, by myself with the headphones on — can be an aesthetic proprioceptive experience. My movements can feel to me expressive, dramatic, and, once in a rare while, a little bit graceful. I also rock climb, and rock climbing is full of aesthetic proprioceptive experiences. The climbing experiences that linger most potently in my mind are experiences of movement — of the inner sense of deliberateness and gracefulness that I momentarily achieved, of a moment of precision and elegant economy. Climber’s talk is full of aesthetic lingo. Climbers praise particular climbs for having interesting movement or beautiful flow (Nguyen 2017a). But, unlike most traditional forms of dance, climbing aims at overcoming obstacles.⁸ The economy and precision of a climb is required by the rock; without it, the climber would exhaust themselves and fall, or simply be unable to advance to the next hold. Dancing may occasionally be a game, but climbing is essentially a game — it is unnecessary obstacles, taken on for the activity of trying to overcome them.

Notice that much traditional dance occurs in a physically neutral environment, largely similar between dances. The floor is flat. We attend to the dancers themselves and their movements. But climbing occurs against specific objects; it’s oriented entirely towards the exact material specificity of a particular piece of rock, and towards the activity which that materiality evokes. Each climbing movement is a response to a particular challenge set by how a particular bit of rock impedes a particular goal. The aesthetics of climbing is not only an aesthetics of the climber’s own motion, but an aesthetics of how that motion relates to a specified challenge. It is not only that my movement is economical and elegant; it is that my movement is elegant as a solution to a particular puzzle of movement. (In fact, the sub-

⁸ I have been informed by philosophers of dance — Renee Conroy and Aili Bresnahan -- that there are many dance-game practices, in which dancers are presented with puzzles and obstacles to prompt their dance. But that is why we call them dance-games.

discipline of rock climbing that I'm involved in, bouldering, refers to specific climbs as "boulder problems" and climbers will often use very typical puzzle-oriented language when talking about them — like talking about figuring out the right sequence to solve a particularly tricky boulder problem.) And, when I am at my limit, it is not only a harmony between my particular movement, but a general harmony between my abilities and the practical challenges at hand.

This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatically aesthetic experience of striving. Once we've seen it, we can see that aesthetic experiences with this character exist outside of games. I value philosophy because I value truth, but I also savor the feel of the moment when a perfect argument finally falls into place in a glorious moment of epiphany. Games can provide consciously sculpted versions of those everyday experiences. There is a natural aesthetic pleasure to working through a difficult math proof; chess seems designed, at least in part, to concentrate and refine that pleasure for its own sake. In natural versions, we catch glimpses, when we are lucky, of moments when our abilities and the tasks to which we have set ourselves harmonize. But often, they do not — our abilities fall far short of the tasks, or the tasks are horribly dull but we must put nose to grindstone and grade these papers anyway. But we can design games for the sake of this harmony of practical fit. In our games, the obstacles are designed to be solved by the human mind and the human body— unlike, say, the tasks of curing cancer or predicting elections or grading.

In a view that is these days considered rather old-fashioned, but may still yet have a spark of truth, John Dewey suggested that many of the arts are crystallizations of ordinary human experience (Dewey 2005). Fiction is the crystallization of telling people about what happened, visual arts are the crystallization of looking around and seeing, music is the crystallization of listening. What I will suggest is that games are the crystallization of

practicality. There is a particular kind of internal value — one might call it an aesthetic value — to certain kinds of doings. Fixing a broken car engine, figuring out a math proof, managing a corporation, even getting into a bar fight — each can have its own particular interest and pleasure. It can be variously: the satisfaction of having an insight to a difficult situation, of finding the elegant solution, of feeling one's body react to motion instinctively, of dodging and weaving and punching at the right moment. It is often the satisfaction of making a key decision at the right time, of seeing all the relevant data and having the solution present itself. Games can extract that experience, present it for its own sake, sculpt it, and purify it.

I take aesthetic experiences of oneself as elegant or in harmony with challenges to be characteristic of a certain familiar type of game, but these particular experiences are only intended to be a proof of concept. I am in no way claiming to have provided a complete list of aesthetic qualities available through striving, nor am I intending to argue that the aesthetic experiences of striving are all, or even primarily, positive aesthetic experiences. There are, I think, some very interesting games, like *Octodad*, where the player control a floppy octopus by controlling each of its limbs independently. This turns out to be unnatural and exceedingly difficult — it is enormously frustrating even to cross a room and pick up a sandwich. The intentionally clumsy control mechanisms offer a negative aesthetics of practicality — a sculpted experience of a tragic practical misfit, which illuminates, through practical experience, something about how coordination underlies even our simplest movements.

We can play games for aesthetic or non-aesthetic reasons, or both at once. But in some cases, the aesthetic value is central to the practice. Consider, then, the category of *aesthetic striving games*: games which are designed primarily for the purpose of providing aesthetic experiences of striving to their players. Let's return to *Sign*. *Sign* is distinctive in several ways. In many other role-playing games, such as *Fiasco*, the relationship of player to character is

theatrical. That is, the player imagines the narrative arc they wish their character to have and decides the behavior that would best fit that arc. They may choose to have their character act in non-optimal ways, because it would be narratively meaningful. *Sign*, on the other hand, is clearly a striving game — the player must take up the goal of communicating their inner truth and pursue it wholeheartedly, in order to have the desired experience. But the players aren't really interested in winning — the interest is in the precise texture of struggling, failing, and barely succeeding to communicate. But these textures can only be adequately and grippingly felt if one tries quite hard to win during the game. This is particularly clear now that I have added my own house rule to *Sign*: at the end of the game, nobody says what their inner truth was, nor says what they thought anybody else's truth was. Nobody ever gets to find out if, in fact, they successfully communicated or understood each other, even though they pursued that goal during the game. My players and I unanimously agree that this house-rule improves the strange potency of the game and that it is very much in the spirit of the thing. This house-rule would be absurd if we were playing for the sake of winning, but it is perfectly comprehensible if we are merely temporarily adopting an interest in winning for the sake of the aesthetic experience that emerges from that pursuit.

The artistic medium of games

Notice that aesthetic striving games have very distanced relationships to the aesthetic objects of attention they prescribe. In most traditional artworks, the artist creates an object which is to be the direct object of the audience's attention. In a painting, we appreciate the aesthetic properties of the painting itself — its elegance, its drama, its expressiveness. But in

aesthetic striving games, the game directs us to perform an activity and then prescribes us to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of our own activity and its relationship to the game — of our own motion, of our analytic abilities, of our capacities for assessment and choice. The designer aims to create an environment that triggers aesthetically appreciable player activity, and to constrain and sculpt that practical activity.

So how do game designers do this? It will be useful here to think in terms of the *artistic medium* of games. Let's follow Joseph Margolis's suggestion and distinguish between a physical medium and an artistic medium (Margolis 1980, 42-1) (via (Davies 2003, 183)). Or, as Dominic Lopes puts it, an artistic medium is not merely a certain set of material, but a set of "technical resources" (Lopes 2014, 133-9). For example, in paintings, the physical medium consists of pigments applied to a surface, while the artistic medium includes various techniques, including brushstrokes. So: is there some sort of artistic medium common to all aesthetic striving games?

First, such a medium will be quite abstract — it can't be something like software, or video, or boards and pieces.⁹ On a first pass, we might be tempted to say that the medium of games is constraints and obstacles. Certainly, that's part of the story. But this isn't sufficient by itself. One might have that view if one was narrowly focused on, say, sports, which start with the normal physical world and our totality of abilities, and then selectively restricts our use of those abilities — disallowing the use of hands in soccer, for example. But game designers actually create new sorts of actions and possibilities.¹⁰ This is clearest in video games such as

⁹ If the reader has a particular theory of medium here that forbids such abstraction, please substitute the term 'artistic resource', as borrowed from (Riggle 2010). For a useful discussion of how abstract a medium might be, see Elisabeth Schelleken's discussion of ideas as the medium of conceptual art (Schellekens 2007).

¹⁰ There is a very useful literature in computer game scholarship outside of philosophy on this, usually under the notion of game *affordances*. (Cardona-Rivera and Young 2013) offers a useful recent survey of the literature.

Portal, where I am given a gun that can shoot the ends of a wormhole into the world to create passageways. But all sorts of games, by their rules, can create new sorts of actions. Taking a piece in chess and strategic fouling in basketball are new sorts of actions that arise only within the context of the rules.

One might be tempted to say, at this point, that the artistic medium of games is rules. And perhaps this is right, if we had a sufficiently loose notion of “rule”. But, in any conventional sense of rule, this isn’t all of it either. Say that you mean by a “rule” an explicit, stated principle for action that was mentally upheld by the players. First, as many computer game scholars have pointed out, much of what computer game designers are doing is designing the virtual environment through software manipulations. The software environment is not a set of rules consciously held by a player; it has an independent existence (Leino 2012). Of course, you might think that the software code itself was a form of rule, just one that ran on a computer rather than on a human brain. But I think we can get even better examples by thinking about various kinds of physical games. Think, for example, about both rock climbs set in a gym and obstacle courses. What fills out the experience is selected physical objects, with their physical particularity, and their arrangement in relation to a particular goal. A rule can tell you to use a particular game console controller, but it is the physicality of the controller itself that partially conditions the gaming experience. The video game *PewPewPewPewPewPewPewPewPew* illustrates this quite nicely. Two people must together control a single avatar, who has a jetpack and a ray gun. Both players have microphones. One player controls the jetpack by shouting “SHHHH” into their microphone; the other player controls the gun by shouting ‘Pew! Pew! Pew!’ into their microphone. Imagine the different texture of practical experience if that were played with buttons instead. These aren’t just rules — these are environmental features. What unites software environments and physical environments is their relationship to

challenge. We might say, then, that part of the medium is the *practical environment* — the environment conceived of in its oppositionality to the abilities we are granted in a game and a designated goal.

But still, this is not enough, because we haven't discussed a key element of game design — the goal. Reiner Knizia, elder statesman of German board game design, has said that the central tool in his game design arsenal is the scoring system. The scoring system creates the motivation (Chalkey 2008). It tells you whether you need to attack people for a shared resource or collaborate with them, or guard the resources you have.

Here I think Suits will be of great use. Let's upload the full, technical version of Suits's analysis. (We have been working, so far, with what he called the "portable version".) When we are playing games, we are pursuing *pre-lusory goals*. These are the states of affairs we are trying to bring about during game play, described without reference to the means of achieving them. For example, the pre-lusory goal of basketball is getting the ball through the hoop. Then there are the *constitutive rules* of a game, which prohibit more efficient means in favor of less efficient means. For example, in basketball, these include various rules constraining how the ball may be moved, along with rules that create opposition. To achieve the pre-lusory goal within the means permitted by the game is to achieve the *lusory goal* (Suits 2005, 37-55).

For Suits, the truly distinctive feature of game playing is a particular motivational and valuational state in the player. In games, says Suits, we do not pursue a pre-lusory goal for its independent value. Otherwise, we would simply show up after hours with a ladder and pass the ball through the basket as many times as possible. Nor do we accept the constitutive rules because they are the most efficient way to achieve the pre-lusory goal. Rather, game playing is marked by the *lusory attitude*: we adopt the pre-lusory goal and the constitutive rules for the

sake of the activity they make possible. We adopt unnecessary obstacles in order to make possible the activity of trying to overcome them.

Suitsian play involves taking on, for the moment, a goal to play. To play a Suitsian game is to accept an activity of taking inefficient means to a pre-lusory goal. Suitsian play involves both taking on artificial constraints and an artificial goal. The pre-lusory goal isn't by itself independently valuable — at least, not very much. We are taking on the pre-lusory goal only for the sake of engaging in some particular activity. Outside of the context of the game, we have no, or comparatively less interest in the pre-lusory goal. Thus, pre-lusory goals are something rather unique, in terms of our practical reasoning. Let's call them *disposable ends*. They are ends, detached from our normal ends, which we take up temporarily.

Before we move on to the next step of the argument, let me pause to note how utterly plausible the Suitsian story, and the disposability of pre-lusory goals, is for so many instances of the phenomenology of game playing. Think about a board game night between friends. We sit down to the game table and pull out a new board game that has just arrived in the mail, taking off the shrink wrap. We pop out the cardboard tokens in a great heap on the table, and the players begin to sort them into neat piles of green tokens, blue tokens, and gold tokens. We don't know what these tokens are, and the physical tokens themselves have no particular importance. If, for instance, the sheet of blue tokens was stolen by the dog and slobbered on, we could cheerfully replace them with pennies from the penny jar, or paper clips. We open the rule-book, and we are told that the gold tokens are money, which are useful for buying various resources during the game but don't count towards victory at the end. The winner is the person who has collected the most green tokens. Before the game starts, we have no interest in collecting green tokens. During the game, if we have any competitive spirit at all, we acquire a hearty interest in the green tokens, to the point where a differential in collected

tokens at a key moment may inspire armpit sweats, jitters, and a surge of adrenaline at the prospect of a last-ditch plan to steal away another person's pile in a dramatic in-game maneuver. And once the game is finished, we lose our interest in the green tokens entirely, shove all of them into a messy pile and scoop them into a Ziplock. On the face of it, the Suitsian picture, and the picture of the disposability of ends, fits the phenomenology precisely.

Note that the relationship between a disposable interest in the pre-lusory goals of the game and the activity of playing cannot be adequately explained with a straightforward means-end story. A striving player then couldn't really pursue the game-end wholeheartedly. Outside of the game, I can describe my attitude towards my interest in winning in a straightforwardly instrumental manner. "I'm trying to capture the king here, because chess calculations are interesting." But while playing the game, to achieve full absorption in play, I need to adopt the mental posture of taking the pre-lusory goal as something very much like a final end, which I pursue single-mindedly, without thinking of some other purpose beyond it. Playing a game is, then, taking on an alternate practical agency with different ends. Pre-lusory goals are not contained in the usual way inside our own practical agency, as contextually sensitive instrumentalities. They need to function for us, temporarily, like final ends; we must create temporary agencies and temporarily subsume ourselves within them.

Why? Imagine what it would be like if a striving player were to pursue game-ends in a normal instrumental fashion: that is, imagine that they pursued the game-end of winning the game simply as a straightforward means for achieving the activity of striving. If the pursuit of the pre-lusory goal were a mere instrument, it would be transparently subservient to the activity of striving. A striving player then couldn't really pursue the game-end wholeheartedly. If the activity of striving were constantly active as a self-conscious part of our practical reasoning as that which lay under our desire for winning, then we would behave very oddly in

games. In any game without a time-limit, if victory were in our grasp, it would be entirely reasonable to delay the victory in order to experience more of the activity of striving.¹¹ But this seems like very odd behavior. A friend of mine relates the following story: his ten-year old son was beating my friend so badly at *Monopoly*, and enjoying the experience of beating his father so much, that every time the father was on the verge of losing, the son would offer him some free cash to keep the game going, just so the son could drive his father back towards bankruptcy again. But the reason this story is funny is that the son isn't quite fully grasping the practice of game playing. To play a game is to behave, during the game, as if the pre-lusory goal were a final end. To be gripped by the game, to be absorbed by it, we must be able to enter the phenomenal state of holding the pre-lusory goal as a final end. We must submerge ourselves in a temporary alternate agency.

What the Suitsian analysis suggests is that games are structures of practical reason, practical action, and practical possibility conjoined with a particular world in which that practicality will operate. A game designer designates *this* as the goal of the game player, and *those* as the permitted abilities, and *those* as the landscape of obstacles in which that game player will operate. The designer creates not only the artificial world in which the player will act, but constitutes the practical agency of the actor within that world — their abilities, and their goals and values. This is why a well-designed game has the potential to more finely manipulate the sorts of practical harmonies and disharmonies we experience with the world — because they are, in a sense, designing both temporary practical agents and the practical worlds they are to inhabit.

So, Suits has given us the tools to answer our question. The common artistic medium of aesthetic striving games — the technical resources by which the game designer sculpts

¹¹ This excellent point was originally raised to me by Christopher Yorke.

practical experience are: pre-lusory goals, constitutive rules, and the environment which these various parts animate into a system of constraints. Another way to put it: the game designer designs both a temporary practical agency to inhabit, with its own goals and abilities, and the practical environment that agent will come into contact with. If you want a slogan here, let me suggest: games are the art of agency.

My claim is not, however, that the point of games is to experience that agency, or to experience freedom. Sometimes that may be the case. But aesthetic striving games can provide all sorts of other aesthetic experiences through the manipulation of agency — including senses of constriction, of drama, of tragedy, and of, in the cases of some addictive games, an experience of the dissolution of the self, of one’s ego disappearing and becoming absorbed in a mechanically repetitive flow-state (Schüll 2012). My claim is that agency is the *medium*, and not necessarily the experiential *purpose*, of aesthetic striving games.

Note that I haven’t offered anything like a definition of agency. This is intentional. I do not take there to be a settled account of agency in general, and that literature is currently undergoing a number of upheavals from challenges, especially regarding the possible existence of group agents and collective agents, like companies and corporations, and attempts to think about other edge cases, including animal agency, robot agency, and the agency of algorithms (like, say, that of Google Search) (Barandiaran, Di Paolo and Rohde 2009; List and Pettit 2011; Gilbert 2013). When I speak of agency proper, I will generally be thinking in terms of a fairly traditional conception of agency — where agency involves intentional action, or action for a reason. I am in no way presuming that this is a complete account of agency, and am happy to think that I am addressing only a sub-category — say, that of individual human agency. I don’t think we need a full definition or metaphysical account of ‘paper’ to usefully say that origami uses the medium of paper folding, and I don’t think we

need to settle on a particular philosophical account of ‘agency’ to usefully say that games use the medium of agency. I have, however, attempted to make my claims about the nature of games independent of controversial commitments from any particular theory of agency.

Games and artificiality

In some sense, Suitsian games can offer an inversion of our relationship to the world. Speaking loosely again: in practical life, the world is fixed and our values relatively inflexible. Most of us cannot help but desire company, food, success. But the world interposes certain obstacles between us and what we desire. They are not the obstacles we choose, but they are the ones we must undertake for the sake of what we desire. So we must try to sculpt ourselves and our abilities to fit the needs of the world. The world tells us we must eat, so we must make money and go to the store. The world tells us that we must find romantic partners, so we learn to be witty, or at least to write passably good online dating profiles. The world tells us that, if we wish to be professional philosophers, we must grade an endless sea of student papers, no matter how mind-numbing we find the task, and so we put nose to grindstone and force ourselves through.

In games, on the other hand, we sculpt artificial structures of practicality to suit the kind of practical activity we wish to engage in. But it is not just the environment we shape — we shape our motivations, our goals, and the goals of the world’s other inhabitants, in order to shape precisely the kind of practical activity we desire. In games, we take up new goals and specified abilities. In chess, we are given abilities of moving certain pieces in certain ways. In *Super Mario Brothers*, we are given abilities of running, hopping, and growing. In soccer, we are permitted our own abilities of running and kicking, but not tool use or punching. And,

through the careful work of the game designers, the abilities we are given often precisely suit the challenges we are presented with. The avatar's jumping abilities and speed in *Super Mario Brothers* are just barely enough to cope with the chasms and monsters they face; the chess knight's strange leaping movement is just what we need to break through our opponent's defenses. And not only do the abilities fit, but their exercise is often pleasurable and interesting and exciting, at least when we've found the right game for us.

How unlike our own dreary world this is! Our abilities sometimes fit our goals in the world, but so often they do not. We desire a cure for cancer, but lack the full capacities to achieve it. We wish to help these students learn to write better, but the process is boring and mind-numbing and provokes occasional thoughts of suicide, or at least throwing it all in and becoming a lawyer. We do not fit this world comfortably. The obstacles in the path to what we value are intractable, or impossible, or exhausting, or miserable. Games, then, can be an existential balm for our practical unease with the real world. In games the problems can be right-sized for our capacities, our in-game selves can be right-sized for the problems, and the arrangement of the two can be such that solving the problems is pleasurable, satisfying, interesting, or aesthetically.

There is, in many games then, a strange kind of orderliness and harmony — a harmony between us, the challenges, and each other. Even with our opponents, there is a harmony. In a good game, our opponent's attempts to harm us may, in the right circumstances, actually create the experiences we value — the struggle to overcome obstacles. What's more, there's a harmony of motivation. Outside of games, much of the pain and difficulty of life with others arises from the dizzying plurality of values. Each of us cares about different things, and trying to mesh the plurality of disparate values into livable communities is hellishly difficult. We are trying to build practical activities and relationships that we can inhabit peaceably from gears

that were never made to fit each other. But in games, even in oppositional ones, there is a harmony of motivation. In games, each person is a simplified agent, and all the competing agents are usually pursuing the same type of goal. I do not have to cope with the subtle differences in your view of a good world and a good life in tennis, because I know that you and I are after exactly one and the same thing: points and victory. It is not that we are necessarily cooperating, but we are motivationally coherent. In some sense, the motivational world described by traditional economics — one of identically motivated rational actors — may be false of the real world, but true of game worlds. In games, our motivations mesh with each other, because the gears have been engineered to fit. When games work, they can sometimes present us with the world as we wish it would have been — a harmonious and interesting world, where even our worst impulses are transformed into the pleasure of others.

And this, I suspect, is both the greatest promise and the greatest threat of games. Games can offer us a clarifying balm against the vast, complicated, ever-shifting social world of pluralistic values; and an existential balm against our internal sense that our values are slippery and unclear. In games, values are clear, well-delineated, and typically uniform between all agents. But this also presents the possibility of a significant moral danger from games — not just graphically violent games, but all games. This is the danger of exporting to the world a false expectation: namely that values are actually clear, well-delineated, and uniform in all circumstances. Games, then, threaten us with a fantasy of moral clarity. Games are especially dangerous, I will argue, when we fail to restrict the particular attitudes of game playing to game contexts — when we export, not only the competitiveness, but the expectation for clarity and simplicity of values to the outside world. (More on this in Chapter 9.)

What we've learned from all these promises and traps is something rather extraordinary about the possibilities inherent in our agency. We can be, as it turns out, surprisingly fluid in the way that we inhabit our agency. We can take up and put down temporary agencies for all sorts of bizarre purposes. This fluidity can certainly be exploited, but it can also offer us any number of valuable experiences. Crucially, I will argue that experiencing a variety of structured alternative practical agencies can enhance our autonomy by giving us more experiential options for the moods and modes of agency. Games are a technology we have to *inscribe* agencies; they are artifacts we can use to communicate particular modes of agency to each other, and to store them. Games can help constitute an *archive of agencies*. Thus, games can not only give us aesthetic experiences, they can aid in our developments of our own agential selves. Game playing is, in one crucial sense, playing around with one's self — with how one values, chooses, and acts. And playing around with one's self can, in a game context, serve as an exploration of different ways of inhabiting one's own self. It can expand the range of one's agency. (Much more on this thought in Chapters 6 and 8).

The account I'm giving can be thought of in terms of its particular relationship to difficulty and achievement. In some accounts of the value of games, especially those from the philosophy of sport, difficulty is essential to create value in the game. The very reason that games are valuable is because they create the possibility for overcoming difficulties or developing human excellences. The value of game playing then correlates to the quality of the achievement — which, in turn, correlates to the difficulties that have been overcome. Thomas Hurka has argued for such a view, and it's echoed throughout the philosophy of sport (Hurka 2006; d'Agostino 1981; Simon 2000). In the aesthetics literature, on the other hand, difficulty is rarely mentioned. The artistic value of that gender-commentary version of *The Game of Life* and the political value of *September 12th* have little to do with the difficulty of play; instead,

they largely arise from a reflection on the representative qualities of the game's systems and mechanics. Sometimes, difficulty is mentioned as an occasional technique. As we'll see in the next chapter, Grant Tavinor suggests that difficult skill challenges in computer games can function as mechanisms to increase the player's imaginative absorption in the fiction. But even in those cases, the difficulty is merely an occasional instrument on the way to another aesthetic goal. The picture I'm offering is somewhere in between these two. The value of aesthetic striving play doesn't derive from the achievement value of overcoming difficulty—but aesthetic striving essentially involves an encounter with difficulty. Aesthetic striving games provide aesthetic experiences of practical engagement, and that essentially involves entanglement with obstacles and attempting to overcome them. But, in my account, we can value the aesthetic qualities in the experience of trying to overcome without necessarily valuing our success in overcoming. For a blunt example, return again to the stupid games *Twister*. Much of the aesthetic interest comes from one's relationship to the challenge, and not being up to the task. But notice that this value doesn't correlate to one's skill and excellence. In fact, being too good at *Twister* might take one out of the realm where it provides an interesting experience — if one doesn't teeter, collapse, and fall, then many of the joys of the experience have been lost. Being good at *Twister* may be an excellent achievement, but it's experientially boring. I'll return to the relationship of my account to the philosophy of sports and the notions of achievement and difficulty in Chapter 10. But for now, keep your eye on this ball: aesthetic experiences of striving arise from the engagement with difficult obstacles, but their value doesn't depend on the successful overcoming of those obstacles, or the objective excellence of the player in so overcoming.

Which is not to deny that there can be value from games in their being fiction, or in developing and displaying excellence in achievement. I am, as I said, a pluralist of value for

games. In fact, it would be rather shocking if such widespread and variable practice as game playing turned out to all boil down to some single function. My goal here is to focus on a value that I think is central, that runs throughout gaming practice, but which has been under-theorized and under-respected. That is: games are works in the medium of agency, and, as such, support aesthetic experiences of practical engagement, among other things. Not all games are such, or are valuable as such. Many of the reasons we engage in traditional Olympic sports built around basic human functions — running, throwing, jumping — would be very poorly explained by my account. There, I think it would be best to turn to the various theories in the philosophy of sport that focus on achievement, skill, and excellence. But I think my account is particularly suited to a vast realm of other games, especially of the sort that are experiencing a cultural explosion — many computer games, board games, card games, role playing games, rock climbing and more.

I have sketched, in this chapter, the broad strokes of my view. The rest of the book will explore, in greater detail, many of the arguments and possibilities that I've touched on above.

I'll begin, in Chapters 2 through 4, with a sustained look at the aesthetics of striving and its relationship to practical reasoning and practical activity. In Chapter 2, I'll take the first steps on the road to thinking about games as an art form by looking at aesthetic experiences of striving in and out of games. I will expand significantly on the brief discussion of 'harmony' from this chapter, and discuss the various ways in which game design can heighten and concentrate the experience of practical harmony, by manipulating the nature of the in-game agent and the nature of the obstacles they face in conjunction. Thus, the medium of agency is particularly good at supporting aesthetic experiences of striving. Players can take up

temporary agencies and pursue disposable ends for the sake of the aesthetic experiences that arise from that pursuit.

But one might object to this account on several grounds. First, one might think that striving play itself was a motivational impossibility. Second, one might think that striving play was essentially incompatible with aesthetic experiences. In Chapter 3, I'll argue for the possibility of striving play. In Chapter 4, I'll argue that aesthetic experiences are, indeed, compatible with the practical engaged motivational states of striving play. Together, Chapters 3 and 4 will develop a picture of the complex motivational structure possible in game playing. To achieve certain types of play, we must construct alternate agencies and submerge ourselves within them for a time. What's more, we must be able to layer these agencies inside our more enduring ones, in a very phenomenally complex manner. These chapters will provide a practical reasoning account of game playing, which will turn out to be crucial for thinking more carefully about the aesthetics of striving play.

In Chapters 5 through 8, I'll apply this account of agential layering and submerged agencies to specific issues in game aesthetics and the nature of games as artworks. In Chapter 5, I'll begin by thinking about whether the concept of art, artists, and works is even useful for games. Aren't games simply the site for free play, and isn't free play something distinctive from passively experiencing an artwork? I'll argue that games are a kind of work because there are prescriptions for adequately encountering them. This analysis will highlight something special about the value of games, as opposed to the value of free play. Games are structured artifacts designed to communicate certain experiences, and a certain degree of prescriptive stability is required to support that communication. But, I'll argue, games are a unique kind of work because of how active the player is in games.

In Chapter 6, I'll return to the worry about free play — specifically, the claim that free play better supports the autonomy of the player than structured games. I'll argue for the reverse: that structured games support the autonomy in their own particular way. Just as literature can expose us to alternate emotional realities and experiences, games can expose us to alternate agencies. Just as free speech can enhance our autonomy by creating a marketplace of ideas, so a broad variety of games can enhance our autonomy by creating a marketplace of agencies. We acquire, through exposure to a diversity of games, experiential familiarity with many different ways of being an agent. That wide familiarity will be of great use in the task of proper self-governance. And it is the fact that games are works — that they are stable, prescribed, communicative objects which can encode and pass specific modes of agency — that makes possible this diversity of exposure. Structured games, and not free play, can encode and transmit different modes of agency.

In Chapter 7, I'll look at what the activity of the game player means for the aesthetic ontology of games, and offer a taxonomy of different participatory arts. I'll investigate the differences between traditional artworks and a new kind of participatory artwork, and then contrast games to other recent kinds of participatory art. I'll use this to show that participatory art in general, and games in particular, offer a very distinctive kind of relationship between artist and audience. The artist is more distant from their artistic effects; they must create their works to accommodate the agential contributions of the audience. But games aren't alone in this. I will point out similarities between games and other types of design for autonomous agents, including architecture, urban planning, and the design of governments.

In Chapter 8, I'll extend this thinking and focus on games as social structures. Games, I will argue, not only work in the medium of agency; sometimes they also work in the medium of

sociality. The medium of agency also supports the transmission of particular social structures, and thus let players experience alternate socialities. Here, we will see another possibility: that games can be socially and morally transformative. What we'll learn, again, is something about the social and moral potency of the game design itself. Games aren't just sites for humans to engage in play — they condition the activity of their players in very controlled and precise ways.

In Chapter 9, I'll turn to look at the moral dangers of games. I'll argue that many of the usual worries, such as those concerning the competitiveness and graphical violence of games, are less serious than has often been thought. But I'll also identify what I take to be a special moral danger from games. Games can offer a problematic fantasy of moral clarity. Precisely that which makes games so enjoyable and which makes many of the aesthetic effects possible — the precisely delineated goals — creates the possibility of a serious error. That error would be exporting the expectation of precise, well-delineated goals from the game context into other contexts. Morally mature game play requires a careful psychological negotiation of the boundary between game playing and the rest of life.

And in Chapter 10, I'll step back and take a look at some other accounts of the value of games and play, and situate my own account among them. I'll contrast the particular account of aesthetic value I've given with other accounts of value in games, including the value of achieving difficult things. I'll also consider the special place that games, as constructed artifacts, may have as communicative vessels for particular agential experiences.

I also offer the reader an option, something in the spirit of my beloved childhood Choose Your Own Adventure books. This book tries to develop two pictures in conjunction. The first picture is about games as an art form — about the aesthetics of striving, and the status of games as works. This is an account focused on philosophical issues largely confined to

aesthetics and the philosophy of art: nailing down the precise details of the artistic medium of games and the status of games as works. The second picture is one of the structure of practical reasoning and motivational self-manipulation involved in aesthetic striving play. This is an account that deals with philosophical issues in practical reasoning, agency, and autonomy, and how they inform the aesthetics of games — and how the aesthetics of games informs those other fields. These two pictures are deeply entangled, and it has seemed to me that the best way to go about telling this story is by interweaving these two parts. But it is also possible to separate, to a certain extent, some of the projects of the book. If a reader was interested in only one stream, I can note that the practical reasoning story largely occurs during Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 8; and the story about art and works occurs largely during Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 7. Chapters 9 and 10 then step back and reflect on what can be learned from both these threads.

One last word of warning: my discussion will involve a fairly large number of in-depth case studies of particular games — far more than one might usually find in a work of academic philosophy, even one in aesthetics. This is due, in part, to the relative novelty of trying to present a unified account of the art form, across a broad variety of games. My account will include computer games, team sports, solo sports, board games, card games, party games, tabletop role playing games, and live action role-playing games. Much of the earlier discussion of games as an art form has focused fairly narrowly on a very small set of games: largely single-player computer games, often with a strong narrative component. There is no established canon of games that I can depend on the reader to be familiar with, especially with regards to the agential medium. The case that there is such a medium, I think, depends crucially on seeing how it plays out in particular games — in seeing the width and variety of possible uses for the medium. So, if you'll bear with me, I think it very important to

describe, in loving detail, a fair number of games. To understand more broadly what games can do with us, to us, and for us, we must look broadly at the extraordinary variety of games, and the ingenuity of game designers. And I hope that the reader, if sufficiently interested, will also seek out and play some of these games. Except where indicated, I have played all of the games I mention and have chosen to discuss what I think are exemplars of game design (except where explicitly noted). My hope is to develop, through both argument and examples, a compelling picture of games as a unique type of human artifact, and as a special art form, and begin to explore the variety of particular ways in which games, as artful manipulations of agency, can be valuable.