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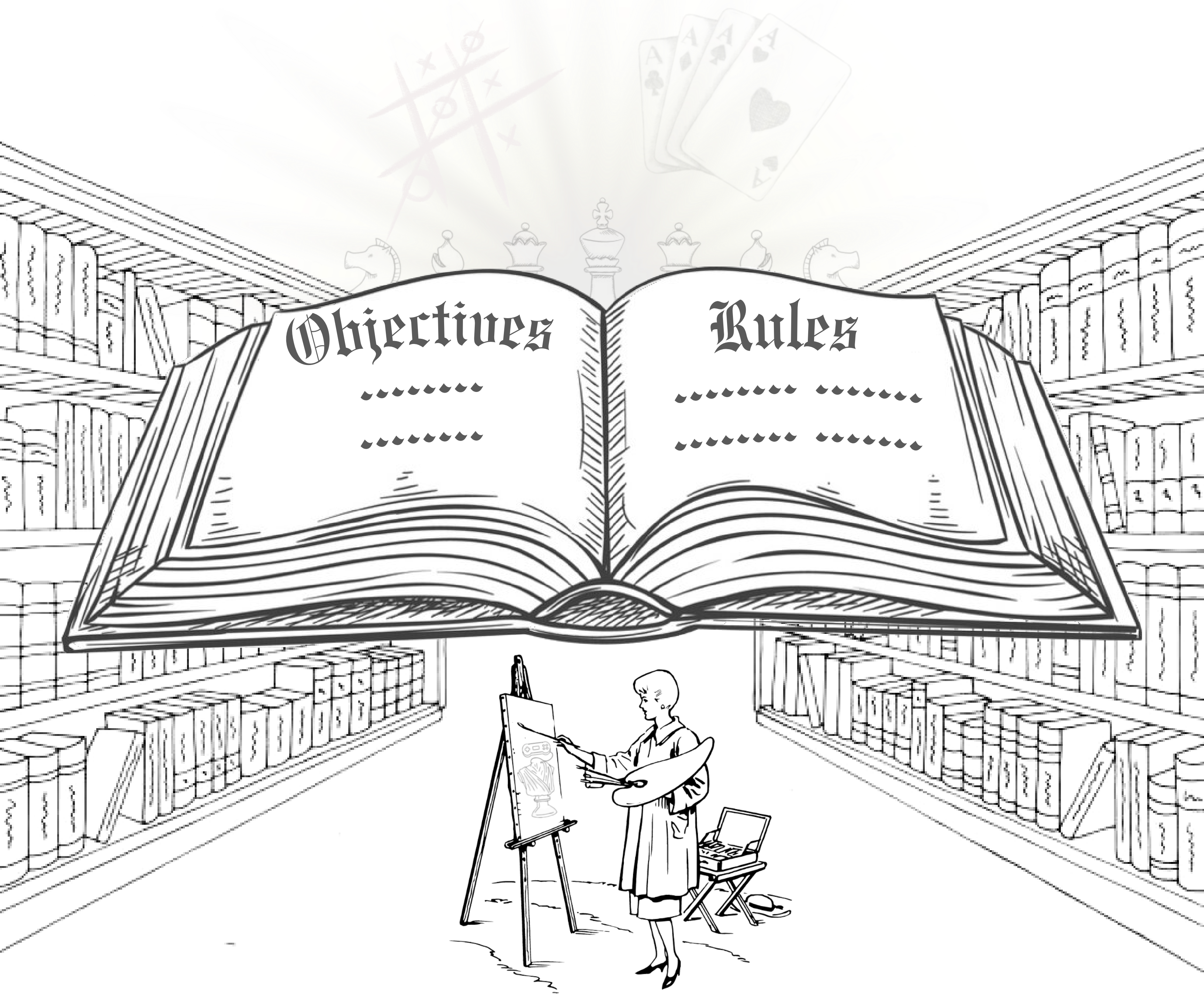

In *Games: Agency as Art*, Philosopher C. Thi Nguyen sets out to uncover the value we find in games. While many in the loosely defined discipline of philosophy of games have ventured to determine their value by way of comparison to other similar valuable activities, Nguyen is particularly interested in what unique value a player might realize from participating in a game. In this endeavor Nguyen identifies a novel mechanism by which games can create value for their players: through the sculpting of agency. Game contexts provide meticulously crafted environments with clearly defined objectives and rules that provide us with distinct ways of being an agent. In this sense they serve as agential vessels that furnish us with knowledge of what it is like to act and make decisions in different contexts. Moreover, actions within the sculpted agencies of games often coincide with a kind of aesthetic experience that, Nguyen argues, makes the design and play of games an artform. In this paper I will reconstruct Nguyen's argument in depth, detail what I believe to be its major flaws, and contribute a new perspective as to why games should not be classified as art.

Nguyen's Argument

Nguyen begins his analysis by adopting Bernard Suits' definition of game play as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (5). Put briefly, games consist of a discernible objective (e.g, getting a ball through a hoop) accompanied by a set of rules that prohibit means in pursuit of this end (e.g, player must dribble, no outside equipment, etc.): respectively the "pre-lusory goal" and "constitutive rules." In this Suitsian conception of games, players adopt these constitutive rules for the sake of making the game possible. That is, if players were strictly motivated by the pre-lusory goal, they would be irrational to not pursue it with the most efficient means (e.g, using a ladder to sink a basketball); evidently this would defeat the purpose of the game. This suggests that the true goal ("lusory goal") of players in a game must be described in terms of how the pre-lusory goal conforms to the constitutive rules.

With this in mind, Nguyen supplements the Suitsian proposal by arguing for two motivational states a player has when participating in a game: achievement play and striving play. The former refers to players who want to win for the sake of winning itself (or something that follows from winning), while the latter refers to players who play for the sake of the experience associated with trying to win. The distinctive feature of striving play is what Nguyen describes as "motivational inversion." That is, if my participation in a game is driven by attributes pertaining to the experience itself (e.g, struggle, fun, humor), then the means of the games constitute my true end. The lusory goal is in a sense disposable, adopted merely for the sake of making the means toward this goal possible. One of the examples Nguyen utilizes to support the existence of such play is the prevalence of "stupid games" like Twister. Players typically play this game for entertaining acts that are produced by pursuing the game's absurd ends. Winning, however, is clearly not that primary "global" motivation for playing the Twister as it is often failures that produce the best experience. However, the adoption of winning as a "local" objective while playing the game is necessary for the production of genuine, laughter-invoking failures.

The final contribution of Nguyen to the Suitsian framework relates to the value associated with these two types of motivational states: games can provide extrinsic value, intrinsic value, or a

mix of the two. So a striving player might play soccer to increase her physical health (extrinsic) or simply for the fun of playing itself (intrinsic). Similarly an achievement player might play soccer for prize money (extrinsic), or for the ego-boost that accompanies winning (intrinsic). With this expanded account of games established, Nguyen narrows his scope of play to the striving type to identify the unique value-potential of games.

As the book progresses, Nguyen grows particularly interested by the manner in which games seemingly create artificial modes of agency. A mode of agency, as Nguyen defines it, is to “focus on a particular set of goals and on a particular set of abilities as the method for achieving those goals” (79). In everyday life, we occupy different agential modes to overcome the challenges that are thrown at us in pursuit of whatever goals we may have at that time. Modes of agency have a phenomenological character; as I strive to write a persuasive philosophy paper I must contour my “reasoning, motivation, and practical consciousness” (53) to the task: an “agential mindset” (19). The consciousness I occupy and skills I utilize for this task will be distinct from the agency I employ, for instance, to be a loving husband.

According to Nguyen, the existence of striving play implies a unique possibility of “agential fluidity” within games. While our ends in everyday life are typically tied to some enduring set of values, games offer a much more fluid account of agency. That is, striving play allows us to temporarily “step outside ourselves” in pursuit of an end that is, as aforementioned, disposable and does not endure globally in any material way. Furthermore, the structure of games allows these agential perspectives to be highly manipulable. Game designers are able to sculpt these practical experiences within games by changing goals, rules, and the general environment. This fact further supports the idea of agential fluidity as agency within games is characterized by a high level of clarity. While agency in everyday life requires that we navigate an “unholy mess of moral considerations, short-term practical considerations, long-term environmental considerations, and the interests of others” (66), the goals within games are typically few in number, quantifiable, and precise. In a word, “for once in my life, I know exactly what it is that I’m supposed to be doing” (67). Taken together, the realm of games represents a library of well-defined agencies that we can cycle through with relative ease.

The final leap in Nguyen’s argument concerns identifying the value in occupying the agential modes of games. While Nguyen articulates a certain kind of instrumental value, or real-world practicality in having a robust agential repertoire, this paper concerns Nguyen’s arguments for the intrinsic, or artistic value of games. According to Nguyen, aesthetic experiences are a quality typically characteristic of art, and agential modes of games are particularly good at bringing about player actions with an aesthetic character. Nguyen’s argument for agency as art will be the primary focus of my discussion, and as such I will reserve further elaboration of the proposal’s nuances for the ensuing sections.

Responding to Nguyen

The account of games developed throughout Nguyen's book must be applauded for its uniqueness and nuance. Nguyen's vast knowledge of games is evidenced by the multitude of examples he utilizes at each stage of his argument and his passion for gameplay is palpable. His discussion of agency within games offers a novel insight into a value of games that rings true in intuition but is frequently overlooked in discussion.

With a high-level understanding of his account in mind, there appears to be two primary features of Nguyen's core argument that a skeptic may object to:

(1) Agency within games: Are we really able to disassociate and submerge ourselves in the modes of agency thought to be created by games? Are games really better apt to promote agential fluidity than other activities or everyday life? Is this possibility even valuable?

(2) Agency as art: Is it possible to have an aesthetic experience in the performance of an action? Are the aesthetics sometimes experienced in games sufficient to classify games as an art form?

While I am convinced of Nguyen's accounts of agency within games, I find Nguyen's argument for games as an artform to be unconvincing, contradictory, and frankly unnecessary.

An unconvincing parallel owing to a confused account of aesthetics and art

The shere obscurity of concepts like "aesthetic value" and "art" appears to serve as both a hindrance and benefit to Nguyen's project; philosophers with different definitions of these concepts might easily criticize Nguyen for a lack of resemblance between games and their notions of traditional art, while on the flipside, a critic will have a hard time definitively disapproving Nguyen's proposal given this apparent subjectivity of artistic legitimacy.

While I cannot blame Nguyen for the lack of consensus regarding the nature of art, I can and do criticize him for offering a convoluted, at times contradictory account of his own. In the ensuing sub-sections I try to piece together how Nguyen conceptualizes aesthetics and artwork[1].

ART –

Nguyen is a proponent of a cluster theory for art: art is defined through "a loose set of family resemblances" (123). As I have alluded to, Nguyen broadly conceptualizes a large member of this cluster as those works with aesthetic value (to be investigated in the next section). These are some different ways Nguyen describes the relationship between games and artwork:

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[1] In parts of these subsections I appeal to some of Nguyen's supporting works in an effort to most fairly and robustly capture his ideas on art and games.

(#1) "[Games], then, ***are the arts*** *in which artifacts are made* ***for the sake of*** *bringing about first-personal aesthetic experiences" (The Arts of Action, 3).*

(#2) "[Games] ***are like*** *traditional artworks, in that they are often authored* ***for the sake of*** *bringing about aesthetic qualities, and* ***sometimes*** *the nature of those qualities is attributable to the intentional efforts of their creators" (132).*

(#3) "I don't mean here to imply that aesthetic experiences are essential to art, nor to claim that games' sole purpose is to provide aesthetic experiences. But games are ***particularly well suited*** *to providing aesthetic experiences of agency" (101).*

A sharp reader will note that Nguyen's attitude on the attribution of art to games varies dramatically; at times he seems to take a strong stance regarding aesthetic value as a characteristic indicator of art, and games artwork as such. At other times he appears to argue for merely an "art-like" quality of games in virtue of their unique ability to promote aesthetic experience (which may or may not be an essential feature of art).

Perhaps the biggest discrepancy within Nguyen's conception of games as art concerns the notion of intent; in (#3) Nguyen seems to contradict himself in the very same sentence by saying that games are created "for the sake of" aesthetic qualities, but that this is only "sometimes" intentional. The significance of intentionality within art is easy to overlook: While we might admire a beautiful landscape for its aesthetic qualities, we do not consider the grand canyon, for example, itself to be art. However, we often do describe photography as an art form. This, I argue, is because there is a sense of intentionality in the efforts of the photographer to reveal and accentuate these aesthetic qualities, frequently through the use of photographic techniques (e.g, framing, contrast, exposure). Adoption of the stronger view of intent would be catastrophic for Nguyen's project; while the intent of a creator is empirically dubious to determine, it is not difficult to recognize in cases where there is no creator and therefore no intent. Unfortunately for Nguyen, unattributed works are very frequent in the realm of games. Especially with regard to sports, the development and refinement of games often emerge from the collective efforts of communities and traditions over time, rather than being the result of a singular creator or artist's vision.

A friendly interpretation of Nguyen would most likely adopt a version of (#3) and understand Nguyen as merely trying to bring to light a novel type of action-based aesthetic unique to games; a greater awareness of this possibility might enrich our understanding of why games are valuable and optimize the approach game designers take. Indeed, Nguyen himself states that his attribution of art to games is "a minimal claim" and that he "is not particularly attached to it" (AoA, 4). I think this is the correct interpretation of Nguyen, but I do not believe he should be let off that easily. If Nguyen is not willing to take a strong defense of games as art, why bring it up in the first place? Afterall, Nguyen titles his book "Games: Agency as Art" and not "Games: Aesthetics of Agency." How does one reconcile Nguyen's statement that games "deserve to be called arts" (AoA, 1) with his statement "I use the term 'art' for lack of a better term" (AoA, 4). It would seem that Nguyen unfairly takes advantage of the ambiguous nature of art to covertly

push forward an argument he is unwilling to stand behind. The fact that Nguyen reserves much of his softer beliefs regarding the artistic nature of games for his supporting works, *Arts of Action* and his book symposium further bolsters this sentiment.

AESTHETICS –

Nguyen conceptualizes aesthetic experience as a judgment of appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of an artifact. In his view artifacts can either be external objects (e.g, painting, performance) or actions of the self. While in the former, "the aesthetic properties adhere to some external artifact," the latter is distinguished by a "self-reflective appreciation" of the "aesthetic qualities of [the agent's] own actions" (AoA, 2). While to the reader's disappointment Nguyen neglects to offer a comprehensive account of what an aesthetic quality is, he clarifies some "paradigmatically aesthetic qualities" such as "harmony, elegance, grace, and the like" (12, 106). Accordingly, Nguyen can be read to understand an aesthetic property as a *type* of beauty inherent to an object or action that is worthy of appreciation.

Games, according to Nguyen, are particularly apt at producing (at least) two types of action-based aesthetics: there is a certain elegance experienced from the first-person when one finds a perfectly fit solution to a challenge ("harmony of action") or when one utilizes the full extent of their abilities to just barely overcome the adversity of a challenge ("harmony of capacity"). In a word, in games we are able to appreciate a "profound experience of harmony between self and world" (110). Judgements of harmony, in line with our above definition, are aesthetic experiences. While these action-based aesthetics can and do occur in everyday agency, the structural clarity and manipulability of games gives game designers a unique potential to bring them about.

In my view, one of the biggest indicators that something is amiss in Nguyen's account of action-based aesthetics is the very real, well-documented addictive nature of games. Never do we describe one as being addicted to a piece of artwork in the way that we describe a child's addiction to fortnite. At the most, and in very rare instances, we might find someone obsessed with a particular work of art. However, the idea of an individual being truly addicted to, for example, The Great Gatsby is preposterous.

By all accounts, game addiction stems from intrinsic striving play; players are gripped by some sort of internal satisfaction they derive from playing the game. Addiction, afterall and by definition, is an unhealthy attachment to a feeling generated by a substance, thing or activity. How might game addiction be explained by Nguyen's view that the biggest, perhaps only source of intrinsic value players find in striving to play is of an aesthetic kind? Why do we not observe addiction in interactions with conventional art? The above discrepancy illuminates what, in my view, is the biggest issue in Nguyen's account of game aesthetics: he deceptively describes in-game goods (or pleasures) solely in aesthetic terms that ignores the possibility of coinciding, often more pertinent explanations. An understanding of what I mean here will take some work.

Perhaps the greatest pleasure that arises from playing games is the overcoming of a difficult obstacle. As aforementioned, Nguyen captures this good with the harmony of action: “you experience, not only the fit between the obstacle and the solution, but the fit between the obstacle and yourself as the **originator** of those solutions” (108). Upon a close reading of Nguyen, the significance of myself “as the originator” is only relevant insofar as it grants me a “deeper access” into how the solution was generated. Accordingly, we still retain the “disinterested attitude” (117) necessary for aesthetic experience. In other words, for all intents and purposes, we are appreciating the action’s aesthetic quality almost as if it were performed by someone else. The difference is, however, the actual aesthetic quality is observable only from the perspective of the one performing the action: “The harmony of action expands on the harmony of solution” (108).[2]

Something is lost here. I “as the originator” has a bigger implication beyond merely an expanded access to aesthetic material. Namely, a sense of ownership over an impressive act of agency frequently coincides with a sense of pride, gratification, and satisfaction within the agent. Coming full circle, the existence of these pleasures is evidenced by the existence of game addiction. Players are not addicted to some removed, appreciative experience of the aesthetic quality of their actions; just as this notion is ludicrous in the context of conventional art, it is here too. Instead, they are addicted to the manner in which these acts trigger psychological reward systems and generate feelings of gratification and self-satisfaction.

An example of action-based, aesthetic experience outside the realm of games that Nguyen frequently mentions is the aesthetic appreciation of “finally solving a difficult philosophy problem that had been tormenting [him] years” (111). My above argument provides rationale to an exploding intuition that the harmony of capacity does not fully describe the good of this experience. To be sure, a mere appreciation of a practical harmony would pale in comparison to the gratifying feelings of pride and relief that would likely be characteristic of this experience.

In my view, the existence of such pleasures is beyond the scope of a theory of aesthetics. If, however, Nguyen were to make the (unconvincing) argument that they are in fact a part of the broader aesthetic experience, then he must at least accept a paradigmatic difference between action-based and object-based aesthetics. In summary, a removed, aesthetic experience of one’s action does not capture the full range of pleasures they feel from overcoming obstacles and operating at capacity: those experiences of relief, gratification, self-satisfaction, and so forth.

As described, Nguyen’s account of aesthetics is not particularly convincing: he explains that “aesthetic theory should be largely beholden to actual aesthetic language,” and then proceeds to “explain the value of a struggle in aesthetic terms” in a manner that doesn’t capture the full value or pleasure of the struggle.

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[2] The harmony of solution is object-based. It represents our aesthetic appreciation of the harmony between a solution and the challenge it addresses with no imposed notion of self-origination.

Differences between Games and Art

As I have indicated throughout this paper, art is a social construct. That is, social contexts shape how we understand, create, and appreciate artwork. This largely explains Nguyen's support of cluster theory: to characterize something (e.g, games) as art is to demonstrate its sharing of substantial *similarities* with other notions of accepted arts. However, these considerations also must account for *differences.* I now wish to articulate the structural differences between games and conventional art that further obscure the possibility of a symbiotic relationship.

All art acknowledges two types of roles: the creator(s) and the audience. For example, music is created to be listened to, movies are made to be watched, and so forth. In one interpretation of games as art, the players (as creators) compete for the sake of entertaining an audience which might appreciate aesthetic qualities found in the performance of these players. This would situate games as somewhat of a performance art with a structure most analogous to movies; operating within the confines of a director's vision (analogous to game design), actors perform for the sake of an audience's enjoyment.

However, to account for process aesthetics argued to be characteristic of striving play, Nguyen must conceptualize the game designer as the creator and the player(s) as the audience. Games in this view are distinctly different from every single conventional art (e.g, painting, literature, music, etc.) form in that they rely on the audience for the production of aesthetic qualities. That is, while a painting is already imbued with aesthetic qualities, a game merely contains the potential for such.

This unique status of a player as creator and observer differentiates games in a variety of ways from art:

(1) Recordability and communication: While "we can use games to communicate forms of agency (1)," we cannot use them to communicate aesthetic properties. Afterall, they are inherently first-personal as defined. While all aesthetic experience is arguably subjective experience (i.e, the effect a van Gogh has on me might be phenomenologically different than it has on someone else), the aesthetic qualities of conventional art forms are all incorporated within objects that physically persist (literature, paintings) or can be recorded (performances). Put differently, there is a sense of "double subjectivity" that distinguishes game aesthetics as defined since the object itself is knowable only from the first-person perspective. This bears negative implications for their recordability and communicability.

(2) Artistic Autonomy: The interactivity of games assumes a particular disposition of the game designer that is different in nature from the creator-role associated with traditional arts. In a word, conventional art is made with the artist's vision in mind, while games are created with the player's vision in mind. Game designers looking to maximize aesthetic experience are not concerned with the aesthetic qualities of their creations, but with how the actions of players interacting with their works might give rise to aesthetic qualities. Ironically, the greater autonomy

afforded to the “audiences” (i.e, players) of games restricts the artistic autonomy of the creators themselves.

(3) Recognition: The restricted autonomy of game designers just described manifests itself in an interesting phenomenon we observe in the realm of games: the excellence of players is valued more than the excellence of game designers. Art history is filled with famous figures of the likes of Hitchcock, Cassatt, Morrison, and so forth. In games and sport, we recognize the players: Magnus Carlson, Serena Williams, Babe Ruth, etc. In the realm of (conventional) art, it would be absurd to recognize the audience for greatness. This is because art is intended to display the abilities of the creator rather than the skills of the artwork’s audience. In the realm of games, however, the artistic license of game designers is confined to an ability to indirectly influence a number of “practical harmonies” that can be counted on one hand.

This structural discrepancy between conventional art and games is not a trivial issue. In a domain as notoriously ambiguous as art, any attribute universally shared by all constituent forms of artwork is significant. The fact that the conventional structure of art is inapplicable to Nguyen’s account of games does not bode well for games as art.

Why must games be classified as art?

Recall that the overarching purpose behind Nguyen’s book is to establish the unique value in gameplay. He finds it through an exposition of the agential fluidity afforded by games; they prove themselves as instrumentally valuable by exposing us to different forms of agency that can be practically useful later on, and intrinsically valuable by letting us experience our agency in ways not common in everyday life. With this being said, it is perplexing why Nguyen appeals to obscure notions of aesthetics and art to ground the latter.

For one thing, and what I hope has been made clear by now, a description of agential fluidity in artistic terms makes Nguyen vulnerable to an onslaught of objections; he (in theory) must actively defend an unconventional, action-based view of aesthetics whilst simultaneously arguing that the existence of such aesthetic properties within games qualifies them as art. This move, however, seems unnecessary and distracts from his account of value within a game; nothing about the instrumental or intrinsic value of agential fluidity screams art. As my discussion on aesthetics indicates, Nguyen might simply acknowledge that there exists some good in the broad range of positive experiences, or pleasures inherent to acts of (effective) agency. Games, then, are intrinsically valuable in virtue of their ability to consistently bring about this good.

In my opinion, Nguyen’s attribution of art to games is not made in an effort to reveal their unique value, but to legitimize this value by grounding it in a discipline already highly esteemed by society. In other words, Nguyen’s project might be motivated by a desire to remove the negative connotations from games; they are “childish” or “unproductive forms of leisure.” If I am right, then I propose that a better pathway to ground the unique value of games in a pre-defined class of activity is to situate them in between experiential entertainment and experiential learning: they

are part simulated learning environment and part roller coaster. By embracing this hybrid nature, we can acknowledge the diverse ways in which games engage and enrich our lives, offering both unique experiences of self and opportunities for personal growth. This reframing moves beyond the limitations of traditional aesthetic categorization, allowing games to be celebrated for their own distinctive qualities and contributions to human experience.