Précis of *Games: Agency as Art*

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This précis was originally written for a Pea Soup [online book forum](). Games: Agency as Art *is [available from Oxford University Press]().*

Games are a distinctive form of art — and very different from many traditional arts. Games work in the medium of agency. Game designers don't just tell stories or create environments. They tell us what our abilities will be in the game. They set our motivations, by setting the scoring system and specifying the win-conditions. Game designers sculpt temporary agencies for us to occupy. And when we play games, we adopt these designed agencies, submerging ourselves in them, and taking on their specified ends for a while.

Games constitute a *library of agencies* — and by exploring them, we can learn new ways to inhabit our own agency. When we play games, we engage in a special form of agential fluidity. We can absorb ourselves temporarily in alternate, constructed agencies. Games make use of that capacity to record different practical mindsets. Games turn out to be our technology for communicating forms of agency.

The book's analysis begins with Bernard Suits' proposal that to play a game is to voluntarily take on unnecessary obstacles. For Suits, the essence of game-playing lies in a curious relationship between means and ends. The end we pursue in a game isn't usually valuable in itself. Passing the ball through the basket has little value on its own; otherwise we would just take a ladder to an empty court and have at it. A game-goal is valuable when it is achieved within certain specified constraints. Baskets are valuable when we make them while obeying the dribbling constraint and facing opponents.

Suits' analysis suggests that there are different motivational approaches available to game players:

> *Achievement play*: Trying to win for the value of winning (or the value of what follows from winning, like money)

Striving play: Trying to win for the value of the struggle (or what follows from the struggle, like fitness)

Achievement play is motivationally straightforward. An achievement player tries to win because winning is valuable to them. But a striving player doesn't value winning in any sort of enduring way. They get themselves to care temporarily about winning in order to be absorbed in the struggle. Striving play, then, involves a curious motivational inversion. In ordinary practical life, we choose the means for the sake of the end. In striving play, we choose the end for the sake of the means that it forces is through.

Some doubt that striving play exists. But consider what we might call "stupid games". A stupid game is one where:

1. The fun part is failing

2. But you have to try to succeed in order to have fun.

Stupid games include *Twister*, Telephone, and many drinking games. In *Twister,* the funny part is when you fall. But it isn't funny if you fell on purpose. Falling is only funny as a genuine failure, and it's a genuine failure only if you were really trying to succeed.

Stupid games demonstrate the possibility of striving play. What we really want is comic failure, but in order to get it, we must submerge ourselves in the struggle to succeed. But it isn't success what we really care about. Striving play shows that our local goals and our larger purposes can diverge sharply. Once we have cottoned on, we can see that the motivational structure of striving play is commonplace. In so much game-play, our larger purpose is to have fun, but having fun requires a temporary dedication to the win.

Games are often misunderstood by scholars. It is easy to look at these artificial game goals — crossing the finish line, accumulating green tokens — and see no value in them. It is tempting, then, to declare the game worthless. But to see the value of striving play, we should look, not forward, to the goal of the game and what follows from it, but backwards, to the activity of pursuit. The goals of games are often valuable in virtue of the activity that they shape and inspire. (And games are not the only striving activity. [Art appreciation is best understood as a striving activity](#) — one where we

pursue correct judgments about art for the sake of the delightful struggle to understand.)

Game-playing demonstrates our capacity for agential fluidity. When we haul out a new board game, we read the rules to find out what we are supposed to care about: competing or cooperating; accumulating money or gaining experience points; collecting resources or killing other players. And to get the most out of the game, we must bring ourselves to care as the rules direct.

Striving play shows that we can take on *disposable ends*. We can take on temporary ends for instrumental reasons – but also make them appear under the guise of finality. We must be able to *submerge ourselves* in this alternate agency, to put our larger agency out of mind. Imagine a striving player who could only pursue game goals in a transparently instrumental fashion. They could never be wholehearted in their play. Since they pursued the win transparently for the sake of the struggle, it would be entirely reasonable for them to throw the game whenever they were about to win, in order to prolong the struggle. But this makes it impossible to have the total instrumental absorption that so many players desire. The phenomenology of game play shows that we have the ability to submerge ourselves in alternate agencies. We can put our larger interest in a pleasurable struggle out of mind for a while, and devote ourselves to the goal of winning.

So: game designers sculpt a form of agency and embed it in a game. And players submerge themselves in that sculpted agency. Games, then, turn out to be our technology for recording and communicating forms of agency. They comprise our library of agencies. And, just as libraries of conventional texts let us explore others' ideas, narratives, and emotional perspectives, games let us explore different modes of agency. Chess focuses us on analytic, rigorous, calculational thinking; *Diplomacy* focuses us on a Machiavellian style of deceit; *Tetris* focuses us on geometrical rotational manipulations. By playing a variety of games, we learn new modes of practicality. Games can help us become more free by teaching us new ways to inhabit our own agency.

It might seem paradoxical that such rigidly specified forms of agency could help us to become more free — especially when those agencies have been designed by another. Game-playing might start to look suspiciously like subservience. But those rigid specifications are actually the means of transmitting a sculpted agency. This is how we communicate agencies. We temporarily inhabit those rigid forms in order to learn what there is to be learned. And games are not alone here. Think of how yoga works. Yoga forces us out of our physical habits by clearly specifying novel postures. Left to

our own devices, we tend to fall into habit. The strict directions involved with yoga are a technique for surmounting these habits -- to help us find our way into an unfamiliar postures. Games do the same, but for practical mindsets. Games are yoga for our agency.

Games can also sculpt social relationships. By specifying agencies for individual players, multiplayer games can specify practical relationships between players, and so create new patterns of socialization. Scholars often treat games as a special kind of fiction, or a new type of cinema. But games are more distinctive than that. Games are manipulations of rules and constraints and affordances. Their closest relatives are not fictions, but legal structures and urban planning. Games are art-governments.

So what is the artistic value of games? Games are particularly good at fostering the aesthetics of action, at bringing out the beauty and grace in our actions, choices, and movements. (And comic clumsiness, too.) Non-game life offers us the occasional glimpse of beauty in our own action. We react to a falling box with a thrillingly graceful dodge; we figure out the answer to the philosophy problem that's plaguing us with a glorious, epiphanic twist of the mind. These are moments of practical harmony, where our actions and abilities find some lovely fit with the practical demands of the world. But such harmonies are rare in the wild. The world is often too much for us, and our actions often clumsy or futile. Or the world forces us into to repeat easy actions to the point of grinding boredom. But games give us ready access to the aesthetics of action. The game designer can concentrate these practical harmonies, because they control over both ends of the equation: both in-game agent and game-world. In games, our agency and our world can be engineered to fit.

It's easy to misunderstand games if we try to assimilate them to more familiar arts. Most well-theorized arts are *object arts*. The artist creates an artifact, and we admire the aesthetic qualities of that artifact. But games are a *[process art](#)*. In the process arts, the stable artifact is not the primary focus of aesthetic appreciation. Instead, the artifact calls forth actions from its audience, and the audience is meant to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of their own actions. If we focus on appreciating the game itself, as if it were a painting or novel, then we will miss the most important part. The beauty of games isn't in the stable artifact of the game itself; it is in the beautiful actions the game instigates in its players.

Perhaps the most potent and seductive pleasure of games lies in their *value clarity*. In normal life, our values are usually complex and conflicting. Their nature can be subtle, their application obscure. But in games, for once in our lives, we know exactly what

we are doing and exactly how well we have done it. After all, there are points. What's more, all the other agents in the game are typically acting for exactly the same reasons — so the values of the in-game social world are perfectly comprehensible and coherent. Games offer us an existential balm, a relief from the value-confusion of our ordinary lives.

A serious danger of games, then, is that they might encourage players to export an expectation for such clarity into the rest of their lives — to expect obvious values and crisply quantified successes. Such people would then be attracted to systems, professions, and institutions that offered the appearance of systematic and clear value systems – like, say, finance, or quantified learning outcomes. And they might permit themselves to be dangerously wholehearted in their pursuit of those crisped-up values. After all, in games, we are permitted to treat everything as an instrument in our all-consuming pursuit of success. Don't worry about games creating serial killers; worry about them creating Wall Street bankers.

Understanding the value of games also helps us to see more clearly the [dangers of gamification](). In gamification, we add game-like elements, like scoring and levelling up, into ordinary activity in order to make things less boring and more fun. But what works so well in games proper may wreak havoc on ordinary life. Games offer heightened experiences of meaningfulness and success precisely because they employ artificially narrowed goals. In striving games, this isn't especially worrisome, because we are only narrowing our temporary, disposable ends. But when we gamify real-world activities like work, education, and communication, we tempt oursleves to narrow our enduring ends.

I call this larger phenomenon *value capture*. Value capture occurs when:

1. Our natural values are rich and subtle.

2. We are placed into a social or institutional setting which presents to us simplified – often quantified — versions of those values.

3. The simplified versions take over in our motivation.

Examples include: wearing a FitBit to improve your health, and coming to just care about maximizing your step-counts. Going to school for the sake of education, and starting to care mostly about your GPA. Going to philosophy graduate school for the love of wisdom, and coming out fixated on your citation rates and the status of your

publications on some ranked list. Or, perhaps most dangerously of all: going onto Twitter for the sake of communication and connection – and then becoming obsessed with your Retweets and Follower counts.

The account of games helps to explain the motivational stickiness of numbers. Our natural values are rich, but they are often hard to express. The sharp, explicit format of retweet numbers, citation rates and ranked lists have a competitive advantage in our justifications. If we adopt these simplified values, we will be granted a delicious hedonic reward. Our efforts will gain the clarity and the thrill of a game. All we have to do is peg our values to a simple metric. But that metric has been made by someone else — according to their interests, and not ours.

One scant hope: the aesthetic stance towards game-playing might offer a bit of protection against value capture. When we play a game, we absorb ourselves in the instrumental pursuit of clear, explicit ends. But when we evaluate our experiences aesthetically, we step back and reflect on the whole activity in subtler, more sensitive terms. That encourages us to practice fluidity in our agency — a certain light-footedness with our cares. It encourages us to play around, a little bit, with our values and selves.