BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Sculpted Agency and the Messiness of the Landscape
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In *Games: Agency as Art* (2020), Thi Nguyen has given us a deep and compelling picture of agency as much more layered, volatile, environment-dependent and discontinuous than it appears in most philosophical accounts. Games 'inscribe ... forms of agency into artifactual vessels' (1).[1] When we play a game, we take up a form of agency, including a set of motivations, values and goals, which has been artificially provided by the game. Our purpose in playing, in the kinds of gameplay that interest Nguyen, is to have the aesthetic experience of first-personally exercising the kind of agency sculpted by the game. As we move in and out of gameplay, we take up and drop values, motives, and goals that are provided to us by the game. Games can expand our autonomy and the richness of life by allowing us to practice different forms of agency, taking on different ends for the aesthetic experience of striving to meet them. While I am on board with these central moves of Nguyen's book, in this essay I will argue that the situation is substantially messier than Nguyen portrays it as being. Game play, I will claim, is inextricably embedded and entangled in its larger social, material and cultural context. Conversely, I will argue, everyday life is routinely sculpted in ways Nguyen claims are distinctive of games.

   Nguyen consistently and insistently stresses the *purity* of game play: when we play games, he argues, we not only take on a sculpted form of agency and temporarily take up the norms, values and goals internally set by the game, but we do so *immersively and completely*, so that all other norms, values and goals are put on hold. In a characteristic passage, he insists that in game play, 'I must ... submerge myself in that new end – to phenomenally make that temporary end dominant in my reasoning, my motivation, and my practical consequences' (53). He reiterates this language of submersion often, claiming that game play characteristically offers *value clarity* (215), as all values other than those artificially set by the game recede and become temporarily irrelevant during play, allowing us 'the pleasing single minded clarity of game life' (48). While inside a game, he repeatedly stresses, we are wholly focused on the ends set by the game, while the norms that govern our extra-game life get put on pause.

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1   All page numbers unless otherwise noted refer to Nguyen 2020.

I argue that norms of gameplay are inextricably and messily bound up with norms that are not internal to the rules of the game. The messiness comes from the fact that games are embedded in and shaped by three (overlapping) types of context: intersubjective context, material context and cultural context. Game play is ineliminably situated within intersubjective relationships governed by social and moral norms; it is ineliminably embodied and situated within a material context; and often, games carry with them a cultural context and history that brings with it sets of norms. We cannot abstract games from any of these three kinds of embedding, and hence values and norms that govern these three contexts will infiltrate game play, typically disallowing the kind of total submersion and abstraction that Nguyen describes. I will discuss these in the following three sections.

1. Intersubjective messiness

Nguyen portrays game players as driven solely and purely by the goal of winning, for the purpose of experiencing the distinctive forms of striving enabled by the game. He claims that in the context of the game, other inter-subjective norms are put on hold, and the forms of social interaction dictated by the game become the only social norms. He writes, 'In games, we are permitted a brief respite from the pains of plurality … this total and single minded instrumentalization is morally permissible when the right conditions obtain. In games, we are permitted to temporarily inhabit a motivational state where only one thing is valuable. Crucially, this means that we don't need to treat others' interests as valuable' (192). But this seems wrong to me. I see the problem here as two-fold.

First, because I am embodied, I must always perform my moves in a game in *some particular way*. I make my move using specific gestures, eye contact, pacing and perhaps tone of voice. There is no abstracting away from this; there is no neutral or pure way to use my body in a game. But all these choices are morally meaningful, as far as my fellow players go. I can make the exact same Monopoly move in a kind way or in a dickish way, depending on these embodied subtleties. Thus, the moral terrain is never as clean and crisp as Nguyen describes, since I am never off the hook from using my body in a way that shows respect and empathy for my fellow players, and this can be a complex matter – the line between fun aggressiveness and dickishness is, for instance, a fine one, which depends on the full range of subtleties of your extra-game relationship to a particular player.

Second, while sometimes people play games in the pure way Nguyen describes, they often play for other reasons, and these reasons have morally and socially significant consequences inside the game. Someone's new girl-friend may play a board game because she wants to be accepted as part of the social group. A 10-year old may play basketball to get in quality time with his father. A spouse may play a game just to be generous to their partner. An

executive may play golf to grease their business connections. Indeed, I suspect that in a typical game of country club golf, the goals of the different golfers are complex, multiple and different from one another, and have little to do with golf itself. In short, game playing is a socially complex activity, given the variety of motives and emotions that people have while playing.

Even if I am playing the game for 'pure' aesthetic reasons with the goal of winning, I cannot assume that my fellow players are playing as purely as I am. This means that in order to be a good person, I need to be attentive to their social and emotional needs. If the new girlfriend is getting bored or feeling isolated, I may need to alter my mannerisms and banter as I play in order to include her. If the 10-year old is feeling humiliated by his poor performance, the father may need to artificially hold back on blocking him constantly, even if he can. Simply trying to do as well in the game as one can, according to the internal constraints and rules of the game itself, may well not be the moral thing to do. I cannot submerge myself and narrow down my values to clean internal game values on the assumption that my fellow players are doing the same. I must continue to be alert to their needs as humans who are more than players. While some norms can be shelved during game play, moral norms, perhaps definitionally, are norms that never get to be suspended, and morality demands vigilance to the messy needs and motives that drive my fellow players, who do not cease to be complex humans during game play. We must remain alert to not hurting their feelings, not letting them get bored, not embarrassing them and so forth.

Nguyen writes, 'In our full life … we are … constantly rubbing up against other people and the vast confusing welter of their many values. How different that is from our existence in games, where the goals are usually clear, well-defined, measurable, and few; and where we are usually pitted against others with identical, though opposed, goals' (66). Perhaps Nguyen, idiosyncratically, tends to play games with specific people who are particularly pure in their play, but I really don't think this is the norm. People play games for all sorts of messy reasons and these come with moral complications. It is a dick move to just play so as to maximize the win without sensitivity to the complex reasons why people are playing, and why they are playing as they are. Game play is typically an activity embedded within already-messy social relationships. Other people continue to have complex interests and needs that can be abused or disrespected easily during gameplay.

2. The materiality of game play

Just as we are necessarily embodied as we play, so too is the game environment itself a material one (even when it is virtual). Playing, like all human activity, is a sensuous activity. Nguyen argues that the materiality of the game environment recedes from view in paradigmatic immersed game play; our aesthetic attention is only focused on the pure form of our striving agency. This is so

even when the challenge of the game is an inherently material one: 'When I am fully engaged in a difficult rock climb, I am wholly focused on overcoming the challenges. I don't pay much attention to the lovely shade of green on the rock, or how the granite smells' (119). Even stronger, he argues that to the extent we focus on the material environment, our experience is not aesthetic: 'My whole consciousness is lost in complete devotion to this one problem ... My first order perception of the rock is practical and focused, and *therefore not aesthetic*' (120, my emphasis).

I think that the material, sensuous quality of the game environment can be integral to the aesthetic experience of playing. Not only need it not recede from phenomenological attention, but it is a legitimate part of our aesthetic engagement in playing. Calling our sensuous experience practical rather than aesthetic, in virtue of its being an experience of materiality rather than of purified agency, itself seems to beg the question of the aesthetic character of game play. For many games, a big part of what aesthetically engages us is their materiality. For example, I box. It matters a great deal to me what the aesthetics of my gear is; I want beautiful, old-school boxing silks, even though I can win just as well in compression shorts. I want to be able to smell the leather of my gloves and the sweat of both me and my opponent. I care where I box; I prefer classic, weathered old gyms with bloodstains on the floor of the ring and indents where people's gloves have hit the bags for years. I want old fight posters on the walls. I want an audience of people cheering me on and hollering out useless advice as I fight. I want old men in silk suits and hats out for a night of entertainment. All of this is part of the aesthetics of boxing, and it doesn't recede for me when I spar or fight, but enhances my experience. I box partly because I am in love with the materiality of the sport.

Nguyen might claim that these aesthetic experiences are not part of the aesthetics of the playing itself, but rather separate aesthetic experiences that accompany some kinds of games, because they are not experiences of agency; but this would still be question-begging. The material aesthetics of boxing is part of why I play, and it is integral to my experience of myself playing. It is true, of course, that at an intense moment, the smell of my gloves and the look of the ring may not be objects of my explicit aesthetic attention, because I am caught up in not being punched. But I see no reason to insist that the moments when they recede and I just concentrate on winning (or not losing) are the *real* aesthetic experiences of play. Just because these are not experiences of the parts of boxing that help me win doesn't make them less integral to my absorption in playing, unless I assume from the start that it is only the abstract experience of striving towards winning that counts as part of the true aesthetics of gameplay itself – but this is what Nguyen is trying to argue.

Indeed, I want to claim that even in the case of abstract, multiply-realizable games like chess, materiality matters. Nguyen writes, 'During striving play, ... I attend to what matters for winning. I do not focus on the look or the odor of my chess pieces. Those details all drop away as I focus narrowly on the

strategic potential of my pieces' (118). But I prefer playing with pieces that have a size that feels good in my hand, and the right heft to make a satisfying plop when I place them. I want them to look classic in their design. I like my chess pieces made of wood, or at least not the kind of moulded plastic that has a seam. Does having this sort of set help me win? No, except insofar as a distractingly chintzy or non-standard set might keep me from focusing. But part of why I love chess is that I enjoy the material feel of the game and the classic aesthetic of the board and pieces.

I submit that these material pleasures are part of the aesthetic experience of playing itself. It is *in playing* that I care about how the chess piece feels in my hand or how the boxing gym smells. It's not like I enjoy just handling chess pieces or sitting in boxing gyms for their own aesthetic sake, apart from how these material pleasures show up in play. (Well, full disclosure, I do enjoy these things a bit, but only because they remind me of how they show up in the course of play, and only as an aesthetic shadow of the impact they have during play.) Nguyen may have a distinctively abstract relationship to climbing, but I suspect for many folks, the feel of the rock and the smell of the fresh air are as integral to the aesthetic pleasures of play as is the perfect swing of one's limbs.

3. *The cultural embeddedness of game play*

Many games have been around long enough that they have cultural traditions providing norms that exceed their rules. There are norms for how to treat coaches, and older fighters, in boxing. Rituals such as facing off during the weigh in and hugging after the match are not codified, but they are rich parts of the world of boxing. There are social codes for how it is appropriate to interact in the context of role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, including norms around how dungeon masters should be respected and how they should treat others in the game. There are cultural norms for poker tables, from what sort of banter and how much is appropriate, to how one dresses, smokes and drinks. Bowling halls are rich with cultural traditions, encompassing fashions, forms of socializing and appropriate snacks. These cultural traditions and norms can be social, material or both. One can play by the rules without obeying these cultural norms. While some players may enjoy a game without caring about its cultural traditions and history, it makes perfect sense to want to play a game partly or entirely because one wants to immerse oneself in its culture. Moreover, with some games, the cultural traditions are strong enough that disrespecting them is a transgression that makes one a bad player, within the community of players – not bad at winning, but bad at playing. This cultural context introduces a level of normative complexity that belies Nguyen's picture of games as providing crisp and simple values, and of the irrelevance of norms other than those internal to the rules of the game while playing.

4. Being a good sport

My main point, so far, is that we don't actually get a break from the moral, social, material or cultural pressures of the complicated real world while playing. While Nguyen claims that 'Games can offer us a clarifying balm against the vast, complicated, ever-shifting world of pluralistic values' (21), we have seen that in fact, social, material and cultural values and norms make their way into game play, and infuse this vast, complicated, ever-shifting world of pluralistic values into the act of playing, muddying the water much as it is muddied in everyday life. We can suspend these pressures with the consent of our fellow players, but only fragilely and only up to a point, and it is not *characteristic* of game play that they are suspended, even if Nguyen himself has found a community of players that enjoys suspending them as much as possible. To simply *assume* that they are suspended is to risk (i) mistreating one's fellow players, (ii) missing out on some of the specific aesthetic pleasures offered by games and (iii) disrespecting or at least missing out on the pleasures of the cultural traditions in which some games are inextricably embedded.

It is open to Nguyen, in response, to insist I am talking about degenerate, impure forms of play. My response is that, on the contrary, his vision of gameplay is implausibly idealized, and misses out on a lot of the social, material and cultural complexities that in fact make playing games compelling, worthwhile, and aesthetically interesting for many of us, as well as making invisible many of the moral pressures that we need to take into account if we are to be virtuous game players. I think we can see the advantage of my version of gameplay over Nguyen's through a close look at the notion of *sportsmanship*, or being a good sport, to use a more awkward but less sexist turn of phrase.

Being a good sport is about behaving virtuously *as a player*. It is a moral and social virtue that is specific to game play. In contrast, Nguyen defines being a good sport as something that applies once the game is over: 'Think of the paradigmatic good sport. A good sport is someone who play [sic] hard to win during the game, but does not actually care, outside the game, whether they have won or lost' (193). This strikes me as too strong and too weak at once.

On the one hand, it is totally fine to be enormously proud of a win, to care deeply about one's game performance. Being a good sport does not require this kind of emotional lack of investment in one's performance. It does require not being a 'sore loser' – not letting one's disappointment in a loss translate into mistreating those you lost to outside the game, or behaving poorly by extra-game standards out of frustration. But I don't think we ever deem someone a bad sport just for being emotionally invested in having won.

On the other hand, being a good sport requires a whole set of behaviours *while playing*, and this Nguyen has no room for. He claims that while 'we may enter into the game for the sake of each other's well-being, we don't need to

keep each other's well-being in mind during the game' (176). We are responsible for 'choosing the right game and the right gaming context' (176) and for not being a sore loser, but for Nguyen, inside the game itself, moral and social norms for how to treat one another are suspended. This fails to capture the essence of good sporting behaviour, I think. I suggest that being a good sport involves showing respect for your opponents *as people* during the course of the game, and not reducing them to mere competitors who can be treated any way as long as no game rules are broken. No matter how engaged in the game they are, a good sport must remain responsive to other people's form of engagement and to what it takes to treat them with respect. One can follow all the rules and be a bad sport by swaggering or gloating too much while playing, muscling out your teammates so that they have no chance to play, or conveying disrespect at the level of tone or posture or pacing, for instance.[2] In a full sense, being a good sport requires not only moral sensitivity to one's teammates and opponents as people but also enacted respect for the materiality and cultural traditions of the game. A good sport knows how to treat their coach, their gear, even the space itself with respect. This is highly explicit in the case of many martial arts, but I submit that we can all detect a disrespectful player of almost any game.

The ways we show respect while playing, while they are not directly in aid of winning, are part of good *game play itself*. How we should show respect during a game is specific to the form of agency sculpted by the game, and not just a separate concern. The requirements on our bodily posture, engagement, tone and so forth for being a good sport are to some extent game-specific, and the same forces that sculpt our agency during the game also help sculpt the virtue of being a good sport and what it entails. Contrary to Nguyen, I insist that the concept of being a good sport *essentially* involves not letting your vision 'narrow and focus' (217) during play so sharply on the constitutive goals of the game that you lose your sensitivity to how to respect the other players and the traditions of the game itself. This pushes against his restriction of sportsmanship to what happens after the game is over. But it is no surprise that he is stuck with this view, given his insistence that only values internal to the rules of a game matter during play.

5. *Sculpted agency in everyday life*

I have argued that during gameplay, values, norms and motivations are not as clarified and simple as Nguyen portrays them as being. I also want to make the reverse argument: it is more common for values, norms and motivations to be

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2   One of the most stunning moments of good sportsmanship that I have witnessed was when a boxer I knew stopped mid-round, while clearly winning, to wipe blood and sweat out of her opponent's eye and give her a brief hug before resuming play. This moment of human connection and care required an empathetic sensitivity within the game to the humanity of the opponent.

artificially constituted outside of games, in everyday life, than Nguyen suggests. Nguyen acknowledges that architects and urban planners, like game designers, 'shape the sorts of activities that arise from autonomous agents encountering systems of designed constraints while engaged in the practical pursuit of some goal' (155–56). However, he insists that 'Urban design, governments, architecture, and traffic design are crucially different from games in several respects. For one, the agencies involved in the non-game examples are typically more varied. Different agents can be pursuing all sorts of different goals when they interact with buildings, cities, and governments' (157). Given everything that I have argued until now, I am the first to acknowledge that our goals and values are complex and multilayered all the time. However, I think Nguyen dramatically underplays the extent to which environments can sculpt our agency and provide us with artificially constrained goals, values and motives.

Consider Ikea. Once one enters an Ikea, the shape of the space and the layout of the goods pretty much determine the path you will take through the store. It is designed in such a way that if you diverge from this path, you will not only get lost, but you will expend frustrating extra labour trying to get wherever you were trying to go; it is basically all but impossible not to just move as the store has designed you to move. But, more deeply, as you move through the space, it sets values and motives for you. The aesthetics of the space is such that it generates sets of needs and desires, and makes finding certain kinds of bargains into a goal. Making it to the end of the store with the right mix of soothing and affordable goods, judged by a standard cultivated and immediately imparted by the store, is the game, as it were. Of course, you can insist on trying to be in an Ikea without adopting these values and ends, just as I can try to use chess pieces to practice my juggling. But everything about the space resists this misuse. Once I consent to enter the Ikea, it becomes a transgressive struggle to use the space other than how it is designed to be used.

David Seamon introduces the notion of a *place ballet*, which is a choreography of bodily motions that is integrated with and elicited by a material place. Consider how a group of friends sits and interacts together at a familiar coffee shop – how they slouch in their chairs, lean forward to talk, sip their coffee, take the same seat each time, hail the waiter etc. This is a place ballet: a set of movements inextricably embedded within a particular material space, with social meaning. Or, to use an example of Seamon's, consider how a worker at a grocery store moves through the aisles, arranging the food. In a place ballet, movements flow together in ways essentially supported by and integrated with a material place. Places constrain and give shape to place ballets, while smooth and well-choreographed place ballets produce organic and integrated places; they help give places their distinctive feel (Seamon 1980). Many planned places strongly determine and constrain their place ballets.

Places that are integrated with tightly choreographed place ballets do not merely fix the movement of their users; they also fix objects of attention, desires, values and standards of success. Ikea is an extreme example; it is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise whose success is entirely about its genius at sculpting agency in this way. But there are smaller, more routine examples of places that are integrated with place ballets and shape agency all around us. Subways, supermarkets, elementary schools and churches all fix the choreography of their users tightly. These spaces sculpt how we direct our attention, what we care about and what our standards of success are, by shaping our sense of salience and offering us built-in rewards and punishments, comforts and discomforts, for using and misusing the space. Designed spaces, like games, set up temporary goals and values, and, through their built form, store forms of agency, by choreographing norm- and value-soaked place ballets. Nguyen describes games as 'libraries of agencies' (98) – that is, ways of crystalizing, storing, sharing and communicating modes of agency. Department stores, monuments, voting booths, swimming pools, museums, schools, churches and pedestrian malls also serve as libraries in this way, with tightly choreographed place ballets and built-in goals and values for users.

Tourist attractions are often particularly good examples of built environments that sculpt agency. They generally control not only our motion but the direction of our gaze, and often our pacing. Moreover, historical landmarks, monuments, museums and the like impart a value-laden narrative to those who participate in the place ballets they elicit. Of course, one is free to critically question or reject that narrative, but the point is that by controlling our motion and attention, the attraction elicits from us an *enactment* of respect for that value system and narrative, regardless of how we feel about it on the inside. One can misuse a tourist attraction on purpose, just as one can parkour a supermarket or juggle a chess set. But doing so is an act of *resistance*.

Nguyen's main concern with the 'gamification' of everyday life is with what he calls *value capture*, which is the process by which our rich and subtle values are replaced by simplified, often quantified versions of those values in scorable form (for instance when our goal of being fit and healthy transforms into the goal of getting 10,000 steps a day on our Fitbit) (201). I think his discussion of this phenomenon is excellent, but I want to stress that we are also at risk of what we might think of as *agency capture*, wherein our rich and flexible forms of agency are replaced by simplified, highly constrained and choreographed forms, because we have access only to overplanned environments. Someone who lives in a suburban 'lifestyle complex', shops at Ikea and Costco, socializes at the country club, and vacations at Disneyland will be subject to extreme agency capture. While there are aesthetic pleasures and goods that are enabled by highly planned environments, a life that involves moving from one of these environments to another will miss out on the autonomy and flexibility that is possible in more open-ended spaces – although surely *all* material environments sculpt and store particular forms of agency at some level of specificity.

Nguyen claims, 'The experience of games is one of a cleaned and simplified landscape of values. Games offer us value clarity' (215). I have argued that while games do in fact sculpt our agency and provide us with temporary values, they do not in fact give us nearly as clean and clear of a landscape as he says, because they are embedded in messy and complex social, material and cultural contexts. Conversely, I have argued that much of the planned, built environment is designed to simplify our agency and to give us temporary and specific values and goals, to a much greater degree than comes out in Nguyen's book. In short, games and everyday life are much more alike than Nguyen makes out. Far from detracting from the philosophical importance of *Games: Agency as Art*, my critique reveals that Nguyen has actually written a book about life as an embodied, socially embedded agent in a built world. The significance of the book goes well beyond providing a philosophical understanding of games; it shows us that our agency, values and motives are layered and fluid, and shaped by the environments we find ourselves in or choose to enter.

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