GAMES UNLIKE LIFE

A REPLY TO CAMP AND MILLGRAM

C. Thi Nguyen

Awhile back, I had been struggling to write about games in the established terms of analytic philosophy. Then my friend and longtime philosophical confederate, Jonathan Gingerich, explained the problem to me quite nicely. He said: our contemporary philosophical theories of value, rationality, and agency had been captured by the moralists. Our theories had been designed by ethicists and political philosophers to handle their very specific concerns. As a result, we have inherited a philosophical picture of ourselves as rigid, straight-ahead, and serious agents. And when we in turn try to think about the other kinds of activity—art, beauty, and play—we find them hard to analyze using our inherited theories. So philosophers tend to dismiss art, play, fun, and games as trivial. But that is not the fault of art or play. It is the fault of our inherited theories.[1]

In "Games and the Art of Agency," I tried to push that point—to show that there are complex, vitally important agential phenomena hiding right in front of our faces.[2] I wanted to show that there are elaborate structures of agency hiding in trivial-seeming activities, like party games and drinking games. In their excellent comments, Elizabeth Camp and Elijah Millgram have set out to complicate my story. Camp and Millgram are in accord with me about the main themes of the paper. They have been convinced, they say, that thinking about games does reveal a remarkable complexity of agency. But Camp and Millgram want to push me on the details in two very different directions. Millgram wants to emphasize the *artificiality* of games. In my picture, games are extremely rigid artifacts. They are explicitly formulated activities, where the goals are fixed, the permitted affordances wholly specified, and the space of reasoning precisely delimited. In that case, says Millgram, they are incredibly

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1   This is not an exact quote. I believe we were walking from one bar to another at one o'clock in the morning, in New Orleans, between days of an aesthetics conference, when this conversation took place.

2   Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency."

distant from ordinary life. In real life, we have to decide on our ends; we have to negotiate and settle on our rules and norms. But in games these features are all set in stone, preestablished by the game. So playing games might be satisfying, fun, and beautiful—but, says Millgram, there are some severe limitations on what we can really *learn*, for use in the real world, from such peculiar and artificial environments.

Camp pushes me in the opposite direction. Perhaps, she says, game life is not really that distinctive or unique. According to my account, our gaming agency is supposed to be wholly quarantined from our ordinary agency. Also, our gaming agency is supposed to be peculiarly fluid and malleable, while our enduring agency is more stable. But, says Camp, things are not actually so neatly divided up as all that. Our gaming agency is not actually so different or isolated from our enduring selves as I make it out to be. For one thing, says Camp, our enduring goals constantly influence our in-game actions. For another, our "real" agency turns out to be fluid and ever changing, rather than some fixed monolith. To put Camp's delicate suggestions into my own, possibly more dramatic, terms: perhaps it is the serious, enduring, neatly coherent self that was the illusion all along. Perhaps we are fluid agencies all the way down.

In what follows, I am going to quibble with some of the details of these challenges. I am not going to address every challenge; I would rather take it slowly through the most interesting points of contention. But let me stress, at the outset, where we agree. We agree that games are incredibly sharp crystallizations. Games are artificial structures that take what is ambiguous, negotiated, and fuzzy in normal life, and force it into an explicit mold. And I think it will turn out that our enduring agency is a lot more game-ish—one might say, a lot more *playful*—than we might have otherwise thought. But my purpose was never to argue that this fluidity of agency was some strange and peculiar capacity, uniquely deployed in games. I think our agency is often fluid. What I wanted to show was that games highlight that particular aspect of basic human agency by formalizing agential fluidity. So, when we study games, we are forced to confront a particularly crystallized version of this essential part of our nature.

In fact, thinking about Camp's and Millgram's comments—and Gingerich's—I am tempted toward an even stronger formulation. In the standard philosophical framing, it turns out that our real selves show most truly in moral and political life. In this framing, games look quite peculiar. Games look like this odd, liminal space, where we step back from our usual mode of quite stable agency and allow a brief moment of fluidity. But perhaps the standard framing gets things the wrong way around. Perhaps we are deeply fluid, ever-changing, and malleable things. Perhaps it is in games and play that our real selves are more deeply exposed. And perhaps it is the enduring, static, committed self that

is more of an illusion. Perhaps this presented stability is an artifact of how are forced to represent ourselves in political negotiation—a fiction generated by the social demand for us to appear as relatively stable, so that our vote may be counted, our desires satisfied, and our wishes represented. The appearance of a stable proxy self might be something we construct so that we may take part in the practices of contracts and negotiation and governance. And games might be especially important to us now—as the institutionalized beings we have been shaped into becoming—because they are a space where we are allowed to let go of those strictures and relax into our more deeply fluid natures.[3]

1. THE ARTIFICIALITY OF GAME LIFE

I claim that games can help us learn new forms of agency that can come in handy in real life. In order to be useful, however, the kinds of agency on offer in games must adequately resemble the kinds of practical agency that we use in real life. But, worries Millgram, the essential nature of games—their artificial clarity—makes them crucially unlike real life. So the forms of agency we might learn in games is far less applicable, and so less useful, than we might hope.

In real life, says Millgram, practical reasoning happens against a blurry and dynamic landscape. So many of the key reference points are negotiable, unknown, or in the process of development. In real practical life, our goals are not set in stone. We can deliberate about our ends, deciding what we really care about. We can come to see that a long-cherished goal is actually worthless, or discover something new to value. But in games, our goals are nonnegotiable. At most, we can deliberate about the instrumental value of midlevel goals. In a game of chess, I can think about whether an advantage in material or in position would be the best way to win. But those deliberations over midlevel goals are always conducted against the backdrop of an entirely fixed final goal: winning in the terms specified by the game. In games, we do not deliberate over our deeper ends, only our midlevel, instrumental ends. We do not deliberate over what really matters, only how to achieve it.

3 I am influenced here by James Scott, who suggests that states—large-scale bureaucratic structures—can only process and see those parts of the world that are easily put into the terms that institutions can process—standardized, quantifiable, regular (*Seeing Like a State*). They can only see the parts of the world that are legible to large-scale bureaucracies. He suggests, then, that states have an interest in making the world more legible to them by evening it out. My suggestion here might be put in the following way: that the stable self is itself a useful legibilization of a more strange and fluid thing that we might have been. I am also influenced here by Annette Baier's suggestion that the practice of contracts is a very odd and specific one, optimized for relations between relative strangers who wish to exchange goods ("Trust and Anti-Trust").

Millgram's observation would be very worrisome if we had little to no voluntary control over which games we played. And that might be some folks' experience of some games. In some communities, participation in sports, say, might arise from inescapable social pressures. But that is not the scenario I was imagining when I suggested that games might be able to give us expand our autonomy. According to my account, many of the development advantages of games depend on interacting with a variety of well-bounded games. We play games, we stop playing them, we try out other games. But the precise features that are valuable in such well-bounded games—their value clarity, their explicit rules—can be toxic when instantiated in pervasive or inescapable real-world systems. The gamification of education and work, for example, turns out to undermine agency. For example: Twitter enshrines certain communicative goals in its metrics—likes, retweets, and follows. But those goals are preestablished and nonnegotiable. So when we internalize those goals, we actually undermine our autonomy.[4] But, I want to suggest, there is a very different—and much healthier—relationship we can have with games in which we rehearse the process of deliberating about our deeper ends.

Think about how people often play games for leisure, fun, and aesthetic satisfaction. You read a bunch of reviews of games describing the different experiences you might have. This game is fun, that one absorbing, this one genteel and relaxing, that one a fascinating simulation of how epidemics spread. (Really—*Plague Inc.* is a great little iOS game, in which you can play as a variety of infectious diseases out to kill humanity. As the game progresses, you choose from a variety of "level-up" mutations, which change how you infect, spread, and kill. I eventually figured that if I became too infectious and too deadly, then I would just wipe out a couple countries and burn out before I could kill all of humanity. And if I kill too quickly and dramatically, then those humans will panic and close the borders. You need to be pretty sneaky and slow for optimal lethality.)

Once you read the reviews, you pick a game and play it, and then you find out whether it really is fun, absorbing, or beautiful. And sometimes you will discover that a game is valuable (or terrible) in a way that you did not expect. You might discover that this interesting-looking game actually forces you into a boring exercise in painstaking micro-optimization. Or you might discover that in the seemingly silly party game *Codenames*, you end up having to model the shape of other people's networks of conceptual associations, and this process is far more interesting than you had guessed. And after you play a game and make these discoveries, you make more decisions: whether to play that game

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4   Nguyen, *Games*, 189–215, and "How Twitter Gamifies Communication."

again or sell it, whether to froth online about how terrible it is or become an obsessive fan of that game designer.

Let me retell that same story, but cast into more philosophical language. In my analysis of the motivational structure of game playing, there is a crucial distinction between the local goal and the larger purpose. The local goal is the thing we aim at during game play ("collecting gold tokens" or "making baskets"). The larger purpose is the reason we are playing the game: to get exercise, be a winner, have fun, relax, find beauty and thrill in the movement. And in striving play, local goal and larger purpose come apart. During the game, I am trying to win, but winning is not my larger purpose. My larger purpose is, say, to get some exercise and destress.

Notice that the game sets the local goal we will pursue inside the game, but it does not set our larger purpose for playing it. A route setter at a rock-climbing gym creates a climbing problem that emphasizes delicate and painstaking footwork. One climber repeats that problem because it helps them train, refining their footwork. Another climber relishes the graceful movement the climb evokes. Another climber wants to show off their flexibility to their friends. Another one just wants to climb everything in the gym because they are keeping a scorecard. All of these climbers are playing the same game with the same local goal, but for different purposes. And that purpose can shift. Maybe one climber starts climbing the problem to improve their foot technique, but after some teeth-gnashing fumbles, starts to discover something unexpected—that they can be graceful, and that the feeling of gracefulness is its own delight.

The aesthetic practice of trying out different games, then, involves moving between fixed local goals and larger, more open-ended purposes. That is: I adopt a local goal and follow it rigidly for a small amount of time. I then back up and reflect on the value of the activity in an open-ended way. Maybe I dive back in and play the game again, and then step back and reflect again on the value on offer, and whether it is worth it. Notice that two kinds of deliberation about ends are going on at once. First, I can deliberate about the purposes for which I might take up the activity. That deliberation is entirely open ended. The act of aesthetic reflection on striving play emphasizes this form of deliberation. I think about the wide range of *values* available in the activity of game playing: fun, fascination, challenge, exhilaration, catharsis, discovery, improvement, intensity, glory, elegance, comedy. And a player can *discover* new forms of value available through the process of play. Before playing *Galaxy Trucker*, I had not known that there could be a glorious comedy to slapping a machine together and then watching my hastily jury-rigged contraption fall apart. Once I have discovered these new joys in the game, I decide whether it is worth engaging in the activity again. I decide whether that particular value, and that particular

instantiation of that value, is worth the time and effort. The first form of deliberation over ends we can find in game play, then, is in deliberating about the *different purposes for which we play different games.*

Second, I can also deliberate about the local goals in games and how they inspire a particular experience of play. I suspect this second form of deliberation is less common than the first; it involves taking on a game designer's frame of mind. When I aesthetically reflect on the design of a game, I am reflecting on how the fixed features of the design shape the resulting activity and what values might arise in that form of activity. I see, for example, that the goal of Imperial is to manipulate the course of World War 1 for profit by changing around my investments in the various countries involved, and steering their military encounters. I can see how this goal leads to fascinatingly tangled allegiance structures, and how much less interesting it would be if the goal were simply to guide a particular country to victory. In other words, I can see how the pursuit of a particular specified goal informs the texture of the activity of pursuit. And I can see how pursuing slightly different specified goals might change the activity of pursuit—by trying my hand at some game design, or simply by playing a number of mechanically similarly games with subtly different goals.

Take, for example, Reiner Knizia's beloved series of tile-laying games, especially *Tigris & Euphrates*, which is generally considered a masterpiece of European-style board-game design. As is typical in Eurogames, the player attempts to collect goods from a number of different categories. In many other Eurogames from that era, the player's goal is simply to collect the most goods—with, perhaps, some bonuses for collecting sets of the same category. But in many of Knizia's games, your score is determined by how many goods you have *in the category in which you have the least goods*. That is, you are scored on your weakest category. You cannot make up for having failed to collect any farmer tokens by collecting a large number of war tokens. This scoring structure forces players to maintain diversified portfolios. You do not spend much time thinking about your best categories, but fretting over your weaknesses. Because of that victory condition, the way to attack your opponents is to figure out their weak spots and deny their attempts to shore them up. So play becomes much more about protecting your weakness and exploiting your opponents' than simply about making a lot of points really fast. The weakness-oriented design helps encourage a deeply interactive form of play.

Games let us experience how a slight variation on the game's victory conditions will change the experience of play. Games thus permit a second kind of deliberation about ends: deliberation about the *selection of local goals*, and how the precise articulation of a local goal can inform the texture of the activity of its pursuit. Since the activity of pursuit is the locus of value for striving players,

deliberation about local goals flows into deliberation about larger purposes. That is, we can see both how Knizia's particular selection of the goal inspires the vulnerability-centric activity of playing *Tigris & Euphrates*, and then see how that kind of vulnerability-centric activity gives rise to a particular kind of value—in this case the value of cognitive-absorption interplay of differing player weaknesses. Games help us see how a specification of a local goal can shape the activity of its pursuit, and how that shaped activity can foster distinctive forms of value.

What I am suggesting is that games can model a kind of life deliberation that has been, in fact, best described by Millgram himself. In his wonderful book, *Practical Induction*, Millgram argues that we cannot figure out our values by deducing them from some abstract conception of the good. Rather, we discover which values are good for us to have through practical experience. We choose a value and try living life with it for a while, and see how it goes for us. We discover that a life lived under one value makes us miserable, compressed, annoyed, and that a life lived under another value makes us happy, alive, vivid. In a later paper, Millgram offers a slight variation of this picture. In "On Being Bored out of Your Mind," he argues that we cannot be identified with our desires because we change our desires all the time. We shift desires based on the experiential feedback of how our life goes when we follow these desires. When we pursue a desire and feel interested and engaged, this is a sign that it is a good desire to have. When we feel bored, it a sign that this desire is a bad one for us, and that we should, as he puts it, excrete out this desire and find a new one. This is the psychological dynamic behind changing hobbies or majors and midlife crises.

Let us elide some of the complexities here and treat both values and desires as forms of ends. Millgram is suggesting that we deliberate about our ends through experience. Of course, for Millgram, it is not just the end itself that is under assessment. It is the way the pursuit of that end shapes your life, partially through the roles you assume and activities you undertake in your pursuit of that end. So, it turns out, whether an end is good or bad for you depends on your psychology, your ambient culture, and the roles and positions available to you. The selection of an end interacts with your personality and your environment—the particular practical possibility space you happen to inhabit—and drags you into a specific form of life.

I myself have tried on many different values during my life. I have valued making money, contributing to the advancement of neuroscience, being a successful tech entrepreneur, writing interesting novels, becoming a good food reviewer, being a successful philosopher by the standards of a particular ranking system, attaining more complex yoga poses, writing interesting philosophy, getting better at fly-fishing, getting better at rock climbing, becoming really good

at chess, aesthetically exploring board games, aesthetically exploring perfume, and learning to cook a variety of cuisines. Each of these goals pulled me into a radically different form of life. Trying to make it as a tech entrepreneur involved constantly sussing out business possibilities, constantly scanning the world for unexploited potential. Trying to be a good neurobiologist turned out to involve learning an enormous amount of biochemistry and anatomy and getting good at dissecting mouse brains. Trying to be a good food reviewer involved driving around Los Angeles, getting familiar with the ethnic neighborhoods of the city, eating food, and trying to come up with new ways to describe really delicious fried shit. Trying to climb the ladder of philosophical status by publishing mainstream epistemology in fancy journals meant reading piles and piles and piles of Gettier epicycles and getting into a lot of technical hairsplitting about formal definitions. Getting good at chess involved memorizing openings and practicing sharp look ahead. Learning to fly-fishing involved a lot of wandering around in the silent woods and staring intensely at flowing water—which turned out to be a strangely meditative practice. Getting good at rock climbing involved long road trips with friends, lots of camping, and then intense attention paid to minute details of a rock face—which turned out to heighten my visual sensitivity to nature. Trying to learn to cook Korean food turned out to involve learning a lot about pickling and dried chiles—and, it turned out I could not get certain ingredients because I live in Utah, so the attempt to cook Korean food gave me a reason to grow certain herbs and vegetables, so suddenly I was researching composting techniques and kneeling in my backyard weeding every weekend.

In each of these cases, setting a particular end for a particular person in a particular circumstance drags in all sorts of other changes to their lifestyle and attitude. To deliberate about ends, in Millgram's practical and experiential manner, is to try out living life under a particular end, and then seeing how it goes—how that form of life feels to you— and then asking yourself: Is it worth it?

What I am suggesting is that this complex, open-ended deliberation about ends is modeled in the practice of aesthetic striving play and reflection on that play. We deliberate about ends when we play different games and then ask ourselves if taking up those ends yielded a good, satisfying, beautiful, interesting, or otherwise valuable form of life. In games, we take up specified goals inside particular assemblages of ability and environment. Games show us, in a particularly schematic and crisp form, how different specifications of local goals can generate different forms of activities with radically different textures. And games give us an opportunity to reflect on the value of these different forms of activity. The process of playing *many games*—trying them out, reflecting on

them, and choosing which to play again—is a compressed version of Millgram's practical induction. This exposes one of the truly remarkable and special features of games. It explains why games occupy a special place in the dizzying array of human practices. In what other activity do we so concentrate our gaze upon the relationship between a particular goal and the activity of its pursuit? Where else do we try out so many variations, and where else is it so easy to see precisely how a goal shapes a pursuit, and shapes the ensuing richness or poverty of activity? The reflective game-playing practice is, in fact, practical induction crystallized.

To sum up: Millgram's primary worry is that since each particular game comes with fixed ends, game players do not deliberate about ends. My response is: but *which* games we play are not fixed. And since we have a *choice* of games, we have a choice of ends, on two levels. We do not confront the local goals of games as entirely nonnegotiable givens. While the goals are fixed in any particular game, we do have a choice of which games to play—and thus a choice of goals. Furthermore, we have a choice about which *purposes* we seek in play, in reflecting on the value of playing different games. This offers us the particular experience of deliberating over the larger purposes that are fulfilled by our pursuit of narrower, more tightly specified in-game ends. We get to decide whether we want to play for relaxation, thrills, or intellectual absorption. It also offers us the opportunity to deliberate over which formalized ends we wish to adopt to achieve our larger purposes. Games were never supposed to be a perfect reflection of nongame practical life, but a crystallized, concentrated, controlled model of it—an *art* of agency. Games model both the process of deliberating about larger, more open-ended purposes, and model how the choice of some particular shorter-term, local goals might shape the larger values that emerge.

My claim here is not that any single game can encode this kind of deliberation about ends. If somebody forced on me me to play a particular game, I would, as Millgram worries, never practice deliberation about ends. This kind of lifestyle might, by immersing us in a single hyper-clear value system, plausibly work to undermine our capacity to deliberate about ends. This is exactly why I think the gamification of pervasive real-world systems—like work and education—is actually corrosive to our autonomy.[5] The important question, for me, is: What does access to, and a rich engagement with, the *library* of agencies encourage and foster? My answer is that engagement with a wide diversity of games, conjoined with the proper kind of deliberation about the value of those games, models deliberation about ends. So the reflective opportunity here is not the result of playing *a game*, but from the practice of playing

5   Nguyen, *Games*, 189–226, and "How Twitter Gamifies Communication."

a diversity of games and reflecting on them—for example, as we might find in the practice of exploring and aesthetically evaluating a wide swathe of games.

But this is not a limitation unique to games. Throughout many arts, we see a similar pattern. Insofar as the arts might aid personal development, that development requires not just engagement with one piece of art but diverse consumption and reflection. Suppose you think that a novel can encode a particular emotional perspective. It seems doubtful that exposure to a single novel would bring about any significant moral growth or help develop any significant ability to see the world from many perspectives. But access to a whole library of differing emotional perspectives, along with some complex reflective integration, might plausibly foster perspectival flexibility. Similarly, the library of games is a powerful resource for practicing the deliberation of ends, but only for those users willing to make a substantial investment in exploring that resource.

Millgram offers other criticisms in a similar key. For example, Millgram worries that in real life we renegotiate rules, but in game life, we do not, because the rules in games are fixed. My response comes along similar lines. There are activities in which we do change the rules—including game designing, house rules, and all other sorts of game-hacking activities. Whole communities are devoted to modifying popular games and finding new ways to play existing video games, like speed running. Both practices modify or add rules to existing games. But we do not even need to modify games to reflect on what the rules do. The practice of playing many games involves seeing how different rules lead to different sorts of activities and different forms of life. This is not a practice of negotiating rules, exactly, but it provides a crucial resource for thinking our way through rule negotiations. Playing games lets us quickly explore how different rules give rise to different activities. When we choose to play a particular game, we are choosing to accept a rule set. And since there is such a variety of games—many of which are only subtle variations on other extant games—then, in picking which game to play, we are picking which particular rule set to adopt from a constellation of closely related ones.[6]

I will not take the time here to respond to every flavor of Millgram's criticism; I think the general drift of my take should be clear enough. The larger

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6   Camp also offers one worry in this spirit: that real life requires us to be actively flexible, that we know how to apply the right agential mode and know how to tweak it. But how could we learn this when games offer us activities under fixed and highly specified agential modes? My answer will be in a similar key: playing a variety of games, and aesthetically reflecting on them, can contribute some resources toward developing flexibility by giving one a tour of the variety of ends, modes, and practices available. But that is only a resource for the development of flexibility and adaptability; it surely does not guarantee that development.

theme here is that Millgram is worried about what is fixed in games: rules, space of reasons, ends. Since they are fixed, he worries, then the kind of reasoning we do in inside a game will be unlike the more open-ended form of practical deliberation in real life. My response is: Millgram's worry only holds for the reasoning we do *inside* a particular game, once that game is chosen. But the experience of playing lots of games is an experience of variation across those fixed elements. If we play enough games, what we will experience is *what happens when you vary those fixed elements*—when you try on different rules, different goals, and different sorts of reasoning. The act of choosing between games is one in which we deliberate about which collection of rules, reasons, and ends we wish to inhabit for a while. This may not be immediately applicable to our deliberation about real-life ends. But it is, I suggest, a model of such deliberation. To play games, and then reflect (aesthetically or otherwise) on the value of the activity, is to practice a version of practical induction. What it loses in precise fit to real life it can make up for in the speed, rapidity, and wideness of its experimental submersions in differing agencies.

2. IS THE GAMING AGENCY REALLY QUARANTINED?

Camp's worries come from the opposite direction: that games are more like, and more integrated with, ordinary life than I suggest. Camp has two distinct worries. My responses will eventually converge into a single picture, but let me start by taking Camp's worries one at a time.

First, Camp worries about the degree of *quarantine* between gaming life and nongaming life. In my account, striving play can involve a kind of agential submersion. I decide to play chess for the purpose of total cognitive absorption in the struggle to win. To get that particular experience, I need to forget my larger purpose for a while and absorb myself in the local goal. If I recalled my larger purpose, then I could not entirely absorb myself in the pursuit of the local goal, because the local goal and larger purpose often suggest opposing actions. My example from *Games*: if a player's larger purpose is to have an interesting struggle and that purpose guides their particular actions in the usual way, then they should pass by opportunities for quick wins, since a win would end their interesting struggle. In that way, being perpetually guided by your larger purpose can undermine your ability to obtain it. To have a certain type of absorption in an interesting struggle, you cannot aim at having absorption in an an interesting struggle—you have to just aim at winning. In these cases, then, our gaming agency must be significantly disconnected from our enduring agency. In games, you shut out the larger reasons from your enduring agency and absorb yourself in a more local interest in winning.

But, Camp responds, in real life, our game-playing agency is not usually so utterly quarantined from our enduring agency. When we play, our enduring reasons actually often penetrate into our in-game decisions. We care about our friends' emotional reactions, the general fun level of the social gathering. We modulate our in-game actions, sometimes abandoning the all-consuming pursuit of the win for enduring social reasons—like preserving a friendship, or making things more fun for a frustrated friend. We see that a friend is getting a little upset and we avoid strategies that might humiliate them. Our larger purpose for play—like having some light social fun and togetherness—often directly informs our choice of in-game actions.[7] So external reasons often leak into the inner, game-playing agent.

Let me offer a handful of fussy qualifications. I am happy to take onboard the observation that there are many cases of less quarantined instances of game playing. My claim was never that *all* striving play has to involve such strict quarantine, but only that strict quarantine is possible. So Camp's observations— that, in many circumstances, we do not invoke the strictest quarantine—are compatible with my own, as she herself points out. My argument in *Games* is an analysis of how striving play should proceed *if your purpose was complete practical absorption in the instrumental struggle*. And, as Camp's examples show, that is not always our purpose. Convivial social play is often oriented toward other goods, and so does not require such complete absorption.

But I do want emphasize here that there are plenty of other contexts of play where players really do seem to want that complete practical absorption, and do not seem to modulate their gaming actions for social considerations. Totally absorbed play is, perhaps, somewhat unusual in casual, social game playing. But total practical absorption is common elsewhere, especially in contexts built to support devoted, intense game play. I am thinking of things like chess tournaments, *Magic: The Gathering* tournaments, and the Olympics. Consider, too, online games like *Dota 2* and *EVE Online*—known for their vicious, no-holds-barred play environments.

In many social play circumstances, we find ourselves in a social group organized along some other axis than the pursuit of the aesthetics of absorbed playing. We are at a family gathering, or hanging out with old friends. Such groups typically consist of people with varying degrees of interest in the joys of practical absorption and varying levels of skill. In those circumstances, we

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7   Quill Kukla makes a similar criticism in an *Analysis* symposium discussion of my book, *Games* (Kukla, "Sculpted Agency and the Messiness of the Landscape"). My response here touches on some of the same themes, though I have tried to offer a somewhat different angle for variety's sake.

often play games to aid in convivial socializing—and to achieve that purpose, we often modulate our quest to win for the sake of the larger social purpose.

But in some other, more gaming-centric contexts, people often gather precisely for the sake of absorbed and intense play. And we often build into such contexts systems to ensure that people with similar skill levels are matched against each other so that nobody has to hold back.[8] These environments are ones where it seems reasonable—and desirable—to permit yourself total absorption. And that demonstrates my primary point: that deep quarantine is, at the very least, possible.

But I think we can uncover even more interesting phenomena if we look more closely at cases where players do, in fact, modulate in-game decisions for social considerations and other extra-game reasons. Camp here is interested in how some of our enduring reasons can intrude into the game space. But my original argument was never directed at showing that we excluded *all* enduring reasons. It was directed at how we set aside *specific* enduring reasons, especially those whose inclusion would interfere with successful achievement of our real purposes in play.

Here, we need to distinguish between two different ways in which we break quarantine, so to speak—two ways in which the enduring agent's reasons can directly inform game-playing actions. A game rule can be thought of as directing us to *bracket* a certain set of our reasons by directing us to exclude those reasons from consideration while taking on the game's specified agency. We can look at two separate forms of intrusion:

1. Intrusion by non-bracketed reasons into practical deliberations in a game
2. Intrusion by bracketed reasons into practical deliberation in a game

Let us start with the intrusion by non-bracketed reasons. Think about considerations of style. I am, for the most part, a person who thrives on chaos and improvisation. My friend (and frequent board-gaming companion) Andrew thrives on precise planning and micro-optimization. We typically import our personal sense of style into our game play. I value creative, chaotic, edge-of-the-seat life experiences and creative, slapdash actions. Those values shows up in my play choices. I tend to play wild, big, over-ambitious moves, which often collapse on me—thought I suspect that I play this way precisely because I enjoy the process of desperately improvising my way out of the broken remains. Andrew values controlled, well-planned environments and sequences, and those values show up in his play choices, as he tends to make plans that are uncollapsible

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8   Nguyen and Zagal, "Good Violence, Bad Violence."

and uninterruptible, and make the game space more controlled. Partially, he does it because he enjoys the experience of winning by seeing a meticulously laid plan come off like clockwork. In these cases, we certainly import some of our external values into our gaming choices. But, in many games, those external values were never bracketed out in the first place. Games can leave a space open for the player to import their differing interest in, say, chaos versus order.

Note, though, that some games do instruct us to bracket out those very same values and styles. Some games allow no creativity or chaos at all—like *Canabalt*, which is a reflex-based endless runner that only gives you one action and one affordance: perfectly timed jumps. *Canabalt* gets me to bracket my interest in creativity and self-expression and just focus on precisely timing my jumps, which is interesting for me, since it involves setting aside one of my most cherished values. Games can direct us to bracket certain reasons implicitly or explicitly. When a game directs me to help my teammates and hinder the other side, it is explicitly telling me to bracket my usual social relationships. But *Canabalt* does not explicitly tell me to bracket my creative style through a direct specification of a goal or rule; rather, the limited structure of affordances leads me to bracket my interest in creativity.

We can build these observations inside the context of Camp's observations to offer a more refined story than the one I offered in *Games*. A game *specifies certain aspects of agency* and leaves others unspecified. This is what I was gesturing at—but failed to adequately develop—when I said that a game specifies an "agential skeleton."[9] The game supplies a skeleton, and then each player puts their own flesh on those bones. So when we occupy an in-game agency, we take on the goals it specifies and bracket some of our enduring reasons. But, since the specification is skeletal, we can import other parts of our personality and agency into the open spaces, filling out those parts of the playing agency left unspecified by the game.

The rules of basketball specify that I will cooperate with these people against those people. In doing so, it asks me to bracket my usual relationships with certain people. I am to bracket the fact that, in real life, this person is my friend and that one my nemesis. I am to pay attention only to whether or not they are on my team or the other team in deciding whom to help and whom to hinder. But basketball's rules leave unspecified whether I should play flashily or carefully. So I get to choose, and I am free to import my external preferences. Thus, the player and the game together generate an alternate agency in the game. Some importation of our enduring values is quite common in game playing.

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9   Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency," 423, and *Games*, 17, 52, 158.

But a game can also exclude almost any part of our enduring agency through its specification. *Canabalt* can get me to ignore my love of creative self-expression; soccer can tell me to put aside my love of doing things with my hands. In particular, competitive games direct us to bracket our usual desire to support other people's actions and act selfishly.

This bracketing of sympathy is particularly interesting. In most such games, we are supposed to turn into wholly selfish beings, uninterested in helping others. This selfishness is often not written directly into the rules, but presumed as part of the background of standard gaming practice. This practice is so natural and pervasive that it can be invisible, so we have to do a little work to foreground it. So: I often play games with my spouse and many friends. I am, in ordinary life, partial to my spouse. I usually take her interests to be more important than the interests of other people, especially strangers, and I will often protect her interests when they are threatened by strangers. But I bracket that partiality in many games. Imagine we are playing a standard competitive game where we are all supposed to be playing for our own victory. But then I begin to assist my spouse, taking it easy on her, or giving her resources from my collection. For many game players, this would break the proper spirit of a competitive game. Many games are fragile and fall apart if all the players are not behaving with egalitarian selfishness. In many such games, to have the kind of interesting struggle players are interested in, all the players need to behave as wholly self-interested and equally antagonistic toward all other players—at least, until in-game conditions change that balance. (In such contexts, you are allowed to treat another player partially because they just gave you a sweet deal in the last turn. You are not allowed to treat another player partially because they promised you a back rub after the game.)

So games ask us to bracket certain enduring reasons. The really interesting part, then, is not just that we sometimes import parts of our external agency into games. That is normal and unsurprising when those parts of our agency have not been bracketed out by the game. What is really interesting is that *sometimes we override the game's requested bracketing*.

Suppose that we are playing for collective fun. Because of the sort of gaming experience we are all interested in, and the kind of game we are playing, we bracket our interest in collective fun and put foremost in our minds the desire to win. Yet still, as Camp points out, our external interests can sometimes break the bracketing and change how we act. How is this possible? Importantly, there is no direct logical conflict between my interest in winning and my interest in having a collective good time. The two are logically compatible. In fact, my interest in winning is partly justified by my interest in our collectively having a good time. It is merely that, in some circumstances, I need to *exclude my larger*

purposes from the set of considerations from which I am actively reasoning in order to achieve those larger purposes. But Camp's modulation cases show that sometimes we do break that quarantine and act in light of our larger purposes. Suppose we are playing an intensely competitive game for collective fun. I notice that my friend is profoundly miserable and floundering, and the best path to victory for me would be to deprive them of a crucial resource that would completely undercut their position and leave them without any interesting actions for the rest of the game. I might, very reasonably, avoid that action specifically for enduring social reasons. Here I am acting on social considerations that I was supposed to have bracketed during the game. But how could I do that if I was supposed to have bracketed them and excluded such enduring reasons from my consciousness?

We explain our ability to act on excluded considerations by postulating what we might call a *flickering agent*.[10] When we *flicker* during a game, we occasionally poke our heads up out of the inner gaming agent and return to the enduring agent's perspective. If we see that we are failing in our purposes—like that nobody is having fun—then the enduring agent can change the inner agent's goals, or abandon the inner agent completely. This model fits both my own observations about the need for absorption, and Camp's observations about the frequency of social modulation. And it fits, at least, my own experience of play. I am often absorbed in the intricate calculations of the game, but I also occasionally step back from those calculations and take a second to survey the faces in the room. It is possible to rationally and reasonably flicker between the two perspectives because of the logical compatibility of the enduring purposes and local goals. I exclude my larger purposes from consideration, not because of some logical contradiction between the larger purpose and the smaller goal, but because of a psychological constraint: that I cannot have the particular experience of absorbed focus until I exclude certain larger considerations from my reasoning stream. This psychological constraint means that I cannot simultaneously occupy the absorbed instrumental stance and the stepped-back, enduring stance. But I can get both the goods of absorption and the goods of reflection by quickly snapping between the two stances.[11]

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10 I discuss the flickering agent at greater length in Nguyen, "The Opacity of Play."

11 I have also entertained an alternative to the flicker model, what we might call the simultaneous-layers model. Here, our enduring agency runs in the background—something like a computer operating system—while the gaming agency runs in the foreground—something like a program I have open. The gaming agency dominates our awareness, though the enduring agency is still running at the same time and is capable of noticing things and breaking through. Though the simultaneous-layers model is different in its psychological details, it is logically equivalent to the flicker model in the current dialectic.

Finally, I am not arguing that the flickering agent is the only way to play. I think there are all sorts of different possible modes of play. We can play in a fully transparent and unquarantined way—with no absorption in an inner agent, constantly in the light of our larger purposes. (Such a player will be good at tending to the social needs of their friends, but have less absorbed fun in certain types of games.) We can have a deeply absorbed agent who, during play, cuts themselves off entirely from any awareness of their larger purposes. (Such a player will be really good at having that absorbed fun, but sometimes miss the fact that their friends are having a really terrible time.) And we can have an agent who is mostly absorbed, but flickers out of it to check at some rate. (Such a player splits the difference between the two extremes.) Different players and different play contexts support different modes of play.

Everything I have said so far concerns the way that our enduring agency might inform our inner agent. But the real oddity of games lies in how the reasons flow in the other direction—in the limitations on how the inner reasons of our gaming agency might influence our enduring agency. The truly fascinating oddity with games lies in how my interest in, say, winning over my spouse—in cutting off her plans and vanquishing her—are *cancelled entirely* when I leave the game. They have no animating power outside of the specific context of the game. This shows that the interest in winning, for a striving player, is not an enduring end, but something more peculiar. It is a temporary construct. It is here where we see the most potent form of quarantine.

Of course, there are plenty of locally active instrumental reasons. I am trying to fix my torn pants, and so acquire an instrumental interest in finding the right thread. The interest in finding the right thread ends once I am done fixing my pants. Low-level instrumental reasons like this flitter in and out easily. What is interesting is that the interest in winning presents itself with the phenomenology of a final end during the game, but that interest is cancelled the moment the game ends.

So my most important reply to Camp is this: we should not think that the inner agent is wholly quarantined from the outer agent such that no reasons cross between them in any direction. There is, rather, a limited and specific kind of quarantine, which works differently in different directions. On the *inbound* direction, we bracket off some of the enduring agent's reasons and prevent them from showing up for the inner, game-playing agent's deliberation. We do it sometimes so we can achieve certain effects, like absorption. In this way, gaming agency is much like other kinds of practical screening, where we exclude certain reasons from our mind to achieve a certain mental focus. But the more profound form of quarantine happens in the other direction—in the *outbound* direction. The truly odd features of our gaming agency lie in how the gaming

reasons are confined to a particular context. The gaming reasons *do not reach out* to ordinary life in an interesting way. This is not a mere pragmatic firewall, where we exclude relevant reasons for the sake of cognitive finitude. For striving players, in-game reasons—which appear as final, and rule with the power of finality over our in-game agent—simply do not reach out into our nongame life.

There is, of course, some relationship between game life and nongame life, but it is of a very complex kind. My spouse and I have been regularly playing a very nice strategic card game, *Res Arcana*. We are both striving players. Suppose our enduring interest is to have fun. But we adopt a temporary interest in winning in order to have fun. Notice that, in the game, our rational structure is centrally guided by an interest in winning. Our interest in having fun is psychologically bracketed, though it is still central to justifying why we have adopted the interest in winning.

Outside the game, I may take actions that will impact my in-game experience. But, insofar as I am a striving player, I will *take the kinds of actions that serve my enduring interest in fun*, and not the kinds of actions that will serve the in-game interest in winning. Let me elaborate on one of my old examples. Suppose I find a strategy guide for a game. If I read it by myself and conceal it from my usual game-playing partners, I would win more often—but the game would be less fun, because winning would be too easy. I should not read it by myself because my inner agent's interest in winning *does not reach outside the game*. But if we all read the strategy guide, then the game would get more complex and fascinating and enjoyable. Then I have a good reason for all of us to read it—because my interest in collective fun is part of my enduring agency.

This can get quite complicated. When my friends are over, we play a board game for fun. My guiding interest is in, say, making sure we all have a good time. Suppose we are all striving players, and we want the fun of absorbed competition. I temporarily adopt an interest of winning—all my in-game actions are guided by my interest in winning and beating my friends. But at the same time, I take all sorts of out-of-game actions to be nice to my friends. Even while I am trying to totally destroy them in the game, I am also making sure that they have adequate tasty snacks and beverages, joking around with them, and generally doing what I can to sustain a warm and delightful social atmosphere. The gaming agency infects none of this.

What has emerged here is an interesting picture—and, to be clear, one, that I had not adequately articulated in my earlier discussions. The quarantine involved with game playing is interestingly complex and partially asymmetric. On the inbound direction, there is often a pragmatic firewall between my enduring reasons and my in-game reasons that helps me achieve certain goals by excluding from my attention certain enduring considerations. But those

enduring considerations are obviously still justificatorily active. And this pragmatic firewall is highly specific. In some cases, the firewall excludes only their awareness that their larger purpose is to have fun, in order to actually have the fun of absorption. In other cases, the firewall excludes many standard social considerations—like excluding various reasons of sympathy, say, for one's friends and spouse. But this exclusion is fascinatingly precise. I can have no sympathy for my friends' desperate struggles to escape from this in-game trap, even while I carefully attend to their culinary and physical needs. ("Do you need a pillow?" I asked my friend with back problems, then I brought her a selection of lumbar supports, even as I plotted the deadly move that would undercut her entire in-game economy.) So my in-game reasons are deeply quarantined, in the outbound direction, from my enduring self.

We can get a better handle on this curious structure if we approach it from another angle. For that, let us turn to Camp's second criticism.

3. NOT SO SEPARATE

Camp's second worry is that I am exaggerating the difference between the in-game agent and our full, enduring agency. In the Nguyen account, she says, we are fluid with our gaming agencies. But, says Camp, in the Nguyen account, our enduring agency is supposed to be very different: it is a stable and somewhat monolithic form of agency.

Camp asks us to consider a different account of our enduring agency. In the Campian account of agency, the enduring agent, too, is fluid and shifting. An agent, for Camp, is actually a repertoire of different practical modes.

> In place of the enduring, purposeful rational agent, we might embrace a model that construes agency and selfhood in terms of repertoires of interpretation and action, with beliefs and goals as especially stable functional nodes within these repertoires. The locus of agency resides as much in one's choices about which contexts to enter, and so which modes to cultivate, as in one's long-term reflectively endorsed commitments or active, moment-to-moment decisions. We achieve selfhood, not necessarily by subsuming our lives under stable teleological structures, but by integrating our repertoires of engagement into coherent characters: ones whose contextual variations hang together in higher-order, often highly complex, wholes.[12]

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12   This precise text is from Camp's comments at the Author Meets Critics session on *Games* at the 2020 American Philosophical Association Eastern Division. She takes this to be a summary of her view in "Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction."

Let us take onboard the Campian account of the enduring agent, which strikes me as very close to the truth. Our authentic agency is not some fixed and enduring singular set of values, aims, or commitments. Instead, we shift between repertoires of nodes, where each node includes a cluster of values, beliefs, and goals. I had meant to indicate something very much like this in my discussion of how we use different modes of agency in ordinary, nongame life. I have a particular mindset I use for political machinations in administrative meetings against hostile forces; another mindset I use to teach wary undergraduates forced into my ethics class; another mindset I use when mentoring graduate students; another mindset I use to comfort my wailing children; and another mindset I use when trying to write replies to frustratingly devious critics. One mindset is hyper-careful and fussy, another loves big ideas and broad strokes; another suspicious of possible veiled motivations; another grounded in empathy and love. My argument was that games helped to train up different psychological modes, so that we might better access these different modes in practical life. We are, I said, something like a Swiss Army knife of practical modes.

I suspect, however, that this image might have problematically implied a certain hierarchy: that these practical modes were temporary sub-agencies, chosen by some kind of master agent to fit the moment at hand. The image suggests that there is the Swiss Army knife with many modes—but also suggests that, behind it, there is some singular agent who deploys the knife. Camp is resisting this picture of the hierarchy, and the thought that, somewhere up the rational chain, there must be a stable, committed master agent. Instead, in the Campian account, the Swiss Army knife is all there is. There is no master mode to rule them all—only different modes subject to some very complicated coherence conditions.

Suppose we take on board the Campian account of the enduring agent as a fluid, multifaceted, and non-hierarchical collection of modes. Still, I do not think this collapses the difference between the enduring agent and the enduring agent. Gaming agencies are fluid in a distinctive way. But if both gaming self and enduring self are fluid, what distinguishes them? In biting the Campian fluidity bullet, I owe an account of what makes the enduring agent special and distinct from the gaming agencies.

Consider Millgram's account of what it is to be unified as a practical agent. A practical agent takes into account a variety of considerations, which thereby encompass what matters to the agent. You could almost think of a particular rational agency as a thing that is responsive to some specified set of considerations. What unifies a set of considerations into a singular agent is that, in a chain of practical reasoning, *any one consideration from that set might bear on another consideration from that set*. I have a number of modes: teaching mode,

parenting mode, research mode, cooking mode. When I am engaged in any one of these modes, my attention is usually narrowed to a certain set of considerations. I usually do not think about my students when I am trying to pickle some kimchi, and I usually do not think about my children's dietary needs when I am trying to write a philosophy article. Those narrowings are practical strategies for dealing with my cognitive limitations. They are the strategies of a finite being. I narrow my focus so as to exclude what is *unlikely* to matter, in order to save some cognitive resources in my desperate attempt to actually get something done. But this is just a labor-saving, defeasible, heuristic strategy. Such considerations *could* weigh against each other, and when it becomes apparent that they are relevant, it is completely straightforward for me to weigh considerations against each other. My child wants to go to his school fair, which is at the same time as an important conference I wanted to Zoom into. Now kid reasons are in play against research reasons. I am cooking and suddenly an idea for a paper hits me, and I have to decide whether to prioritize timing this omelet perfectly or writing down that idea. Now cooking reasons are suddenly in play against philosophy reasons. What makes me one unified agent, says Millgram, is precisely the fact that it makes perfect sense to weigh any of these reasons against the other. After all, it is *I* that is involved in parenting, philosophy, and cooking, and all of these things are important to me, so I have to weigh them against each other and decide.[13]

In "Games and the Art of Agency," I argued that my account of games shows the problem in Millgram's account of the unified agent. There are, I argued, aspects of my agency that are not subject to such a unity constraint: specifically, my in-game agencies. This way of putting things now strikes me as a bit crude, so let me offer a more refined version of the point.

Here is what I propose: my *enduring agency* is subject to such a unity constraint, but my temporary gaming agencies are not—at least, not in their most full-blooded form. There are particular ways in which my in-game reasons will not emerge from their context to weigh against, say, my kid-rearing reasons.

To recast this into Camp's terms: though I, as an agent, may be a thing that moves fluidly and non-hierarchically between various modes, insofar as these modes are part of my enduring agency, they are all subject to some kind of coherence conditions. This is not to say that I need to create some master agency, with some explicitly delimited set of values that could be used to deduce all the other values of the various temporary sub-agents. Rather, it is that I need to be

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13 See also Carol Rovane's account, in which a particular agency is individuated as a deliberative point of view subject to a demand of rational unity—that is, that the set of considerations that belong to "an agent" are responsive to each other (Rovane, "What Is an Agent?" and "Group Agency and Individualism").

able to find a way of conceiving of my different considerations as at least coherently cohabiting. Something has gone wrong if, in my business life, I ruthlessly destroy people's lives and take away their homes, and then in my home and spiritual life I think of myself as a charitable, kind, empathetic person. To put it another way: even if our enduring agency consists of a number of different personality nodes, each of them is at least *answerable* to the others. I can reflect on my parenting life from my philosophical mindset and see if my parenting decisions hold up from a more philosophical perspective. And I can reflect on my philosophical life from the parenting perspective and wonder whether all those weird abstractions I seem to be committed to can possibly hold up from the perspective of my parenting life. And I can question particular choices and reasons that I have made in one mode from the perspective of another.[14]

I often do not connect perspectives like this, but sometimes I do—because the considerations from my various modes do bear on each other. My standard disconnections are, again, simply a pragmatic strategy to get around my cognitive limitations. When I am not on childcare duty these days, I am usually in my basement office trying to get some work done. During those times, my kids are usually upstairs; I can hear them running around and laughing and crying. Normally, I put that out of mind—not because they do not matter to me, but because I need to focus pretty intensely to actually get anything done. I have created the kind of life where I have certain periods of time (mostly) reserved for work, and certain periods (mostly) reserved for childcare. Having a period in which I devote myself to work is consonant with my goals as a parent. I have a pragmatic reason not to think about my kids: sometimes, I need to focus completely on my work because it takes every inch of my mind to get any forward progress in philosophy. So I set up a temporary firewall between the various nodes of my enduring agency to manage the cognitive overload. There is no deep logical antipathy between considerations from different nodes, only a

14 Notice that Camp worries precisely that she does not like playing *Monopoly* because she does not like to be the kind of person who is capable of entering the mental mindset of *Monopoly*. Notice that this complaint is about a developmental effect of playing *Monopoly*—which is developing a capacity to do so—and not about the particular reasons acted on during a playing of *Monopoly*. I think it is far less plausible to say that one does not like playing *Monopoly* because one takes unkind actions toward one's friends. Or, at least, the latter complaint invites the diagnosis that the complainant does not understand the nature of games, in a way that Camp's original complaint does not. Notice, too, a key difference between the cases. It is very hard to imagine how a person might really offer a coherent explanation of themselves that could accommodate being a destroyer of lives in their business life, but a charitable and kind person on weekends at church. But it is easy to offer a coherent explanation of how I might be a kind person and also play *Monopoly*: that explanation is that I play *Monopoly* only insofar as all the players are, by and large, mostly having fun.

temporary firewall, set up as a practical solution to the problem of limited attention. We can see this by noting how the various considerations from different domains will sometimes break through the pragmatic firewall and come into play with each other. Maybe, instead of the typical tantrum sounds, there is the cry of genuine hurt and pain. The firewall comes down in an instant; I spring upstairs. I can, in fact, easily weigh my kid reasons against my research reasons and come to a quick conclusion.

But, I want to suggest, the barrier between my gaming agency and my enduring agency is not merely pragmatic. Here, I suspect that Camp would take the opposite tack. She might say: notice how similar the parenting/research firewall is to the gaming/nongaming firewall. In a game, I concentrate on playing it—but if my opponent starts crying, I can snap out of playing the game and pay attention to their sorrow. I can concentrate on my research, but if a sufficiently panicked yowl comes from upstairs, I can snap out of it and run upstairs to see what the hell is going on with my kid, and if whoever is on childcare duty needs some help. But, to my mind, the parenting/research divide is different in kind from the game/nongame divide. There are two significant differences: one fussy, one broad.

Let us start with the fussy difference. There is *a particular motivational state of play* in which my gaming reasons and my enduring reasons cannot be brought into a single line of reasoning with each other. This state arises, for example, when my goal in playing a game is to have the enjoyments of total practical absorption in the attempt to win. And this is a very peculiar state. External considerations about *playing for the sake of having fun* cannot be brought to bear on the set of gaming reasons, because those considerations will undermine the gaming agency's ability to be absorbed in the attempt to win. So they must be excluded. This is still a pragmatic reason, but one different in kind. The parenting and research reasons can exist in the same line of reasoning, without undermining each other. It is simply convenient, most of the time, to break them up into their own little cubicles. But the enduring interest in that particular kind of fun and the particular interest in winning cannot be put into the same line of reasoning without undermining the quest for fun. Let me be clear: I do not think this kind of pragmatic exclusion is required for every kind of play. It is a feature of a very specific context, where the enduring agent's interests and reasons in playing the game are self-effacing—that is, where the enduring agent must put themselves out of contact with their larger purpose in order to achieve that purpose. In the parenting/research case, the firewall is merely for the sake of managing cognitive load.

Notice that the enduring agent's reasons can cancel their absorption in the temporary gaming agency—but this is a very different relationship from

directly weighing their enduring reasons against their inner gaming agent's reasons. At no point am I weighing my reason for gaining material advantage against my reasons for having fun. Rather, either I am devoted to the win and reasoning in order to win, or my enduring interest in fun has cancelled my interest in winning entirely. One might reply: Am I not weighing my interest in winning against whether or not we are having fun? But I am a striving player. It is not like I am weighing my real interest in having fun against my equally real interest in winning. I am adopting a temporary interest in winning entirely in service of my enduring end of having fun.

Here is the second, broader difference between the parent/child firewall and the gaming firewall. I am not subject to the same coherence conditions across those agencies. I can entirely understand the question of how you could possibly be the kind of person interested in writing philosophy about games, and raising a happy child. These interests are part of a coherent set of values and interests. But a much stranger question is how you can be the kind of person who carefully and lovingly makes your spouse's favorite dinner and then sets out to vanquish all their plans in *Res Arcana*. This question strikes us strange because it presumes that these two reasons have a similar status, such that it is meaningful to expect that they can be made directly coherent with one another. Of course, there is a way to make them coherent with one another, but it requires referencing the specific logic of games. That is, I can do it because I am only setting out to vanquish their plans in the specific context of a pleasing competitive game. In other words: the reasons I have in a game cannot be brought directly into a chain of reasoning with the reasons I have outside the game, except via an understanding that devoting oneself to the in-game reasons will instrumentally support my enduring reasons. Outside the context of the game, I no longer have any of the reasons to win.

So the coherence conditions here work in a very funky way. My in-game reasons are subject to systematic coherence with my enduring reasons, but my enduring reasons are not subject to systematic coherence with my in-game reasons. That is, whenever I am playing a game, I can subject my game-playing reasons to the demand for coherence with my enduring reasons. Why am I trying so hard to win? Because it was supposed to be fun. Is it not really so fun after all? Then perhaps we should stop trying to win and quit this game. But, once again, that relationship only applies to the inbound reasons. On the out-bound side, my enduring reasons are not subject to the demand to be coherent with my in-game reasons. Suppose I often spend several hours trying to best my spouse at a board game and cut off her best attempts at victory. Those attempts can be subject to coherence with my enduring interests. I can say: "Why am I trying to disrupt my spouse's intricate economic plans?" And the answer makes

reference to my enduring interests: "Because it is fun for me and fun for her."
But when I am trying to cook dinner for my spouse, I do not need to square
that attempt with, say, my interest in disrupting her plans.

What is more: the various modes of my enduring agency are subject to
coherence conditions with each other. But the various agencies I adopt for
different games are not subject to coherence with one another. There is nothing
strange about the fact that I want to collect lots of red tokens in one game, but
avoid collecting any red tokens in another. In-game reasons do not cross from
one gaming agency to another.

To put it in the language of the earlier tussle with Camp: the coherence
demands are not a two-way street, where any reason from one perspective can
be put into the mix with any other reason. For one thing, reasons for making
in game-moves can be made coherent with my enduring reasons, but only via
reference to the context of the game and the striving motivational structure. For
another, my enduring reasons are under no constraint to be coherent with my
in-game reasons. For yet another, my reasons from one of my gaming agencies
are under no constraint to be coherent with any of my other gaming agencies.
This is because my in-game reasons are *highly limited in scope to one specific
context.* Quarantine, it turns out, is not the right analogy. In a quarantine, there
should be no mingling at all: the quarantined should stay in, and everybody
else should stay out. The structure here is different: enduring reasons have the
logical reach to extend inward (with the proviso that we often want to forget
about them), but the inner gaming reasons cannot get out. Perhaps the right
analogy is: gaming reasons are in a sort of agential prison.

Let me stay on this point a little longer, because the picture that is emerging,
prompted by Camp and Millgram, is more textured than what I have presented
in the past. Here is the picture: my motivations for doing certain things only
arise in the game context and do not arise outside the game context. This is
true even if action outside the game proper would have results inside the game.
For example, one of my typical strategies in games is to exhaust my opponent's
cognitive resources by making moves that make my opponent's position more
complicated while making my situation simpler. This is, I take it, a way of attack-
ing their cognitive resources and driving them to exhaustion. (Interestingly, I
think many players of board games instinctively attack their opponent's cog-
nitive resources in this way, but this sort of strategy is rarely explicitly articu-
lated. But such strategies are often explicitly articualted in sports like basketball,
soccer, and especially any kind of martial art. In such physical games, a basic
strategy is to take actions that are relatively energy-efficient for you but are
energy-costly for your opponent to respond to—to make moves that give you
the advantage in remaining stamina.)

Notice that we do not think that exhausting our opponent's resources is a good thing to do outside the game, even if the consequence is an in-game victory. That is, it would be strange for a striving player like me to try to ask my friend to do incredibly complex calculations before the game—like casually asking them to explain Hegel's ontology and pretending not to understand their answer, with the goal of exhausting their mental resources for the game itself. The goal of winning by exhausting my friend is local to the game, because the goal of winning over them is local to the game.[15] Notice that the distinction here is not between some artificial in-game agent and the real thing. It is not that I attack my friend's virtual in-game avatar but not their real self. When we play basketball, I am really trying to deplete their real energy reserves and they mine. What matters here is that the reasons we have to exhaust each other are only operative inside the gaming context.

It might seem silly to talk about these phenomena in such an elaborate way, because, zoomed out, the phenomena are so familiar. But that is, for me, the most important part. What I am talking about here sounds arcane when put in the language of philosophy, practical rationality, and agency, but it is a basic fact about game playing. When I play a game, I erect a structure of reasons and considerations. But the gaming structure of considerations only has pull inside the game, and I discard it for extra-game reasoning. Game reasons are highly temporary and highly confined reasons. This is why I think of the gaming agency as a sub-agency, layered within my enduring agency. My gaming reasons are always subject to coherence demands with my enduring reasons (via the logic of striving play), but my enduring reasons are not always subject to coherence demands with my gaming reasons.

To sum up: one's gaming agency is interestingly isolated from one's enduring agency, but that isolation is much more complex than a simple, brute quarantine. That isolation has a different structure depending on the direction of the demand for coherence. I exclude certain enduring considerations from my gaming consciousness for pragmatic reasons—like forgetting that I am climbing to relax, in order to actually relax from my absorption in the climb. The enduring reasons are still live for me, but they will interfere with my absorption if I am aware of them during the game. But the reason I do not try to exhaust my friend before we play the game is a matter of logical structure, and not some practical, psychological trick. It is because the reasons involved in games simply do not extend outside of the game.

15   Of course, I have heard tell of people who do things like this, like tournament poker players who try to psych out their opponents with out-of-game behavior. But, of course, this is easily explained by the fact that these players are achievement players and not striving players. They are enduringly interested in winning the game.

Let us return to the original objection. Camp worried that there was no major difference between the gaming agency and the enduring agency, because our enduring agency involves fluidly shifting between a wide set of perspectives, none of them dominant. I am happy to grant that picture of the fluidity of our enduring agency. But I want to add: there is a key difference between the fluidity of the enduring agent's modes and the fluidity of our gaming agencies. The enduring agency's many modes are subject to a thoroughgoing unity constraint. The gaming agencies are subject to a very different constraint—a one-way constraint. The gaming agencies need to make sense from the perspectives of the enduring agent, but the enduring agent's many modes need not make sense from the perspective of the gaming agency. The gaming agency is a disposable sub-mode, which is not subject to the same thoroughgoing demand for unity and coherence. The gaming agency is answerable to the justificatory perspectives of the enduring self, but the enduring self is not answerable to the justificatory perspective of the gaming agency.

University of Utah
c.thi.nguyen@utah.edu

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