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worries about, if one ever worries about one's ignorance of whether there are other people, is that one is ignorant about whether *there are other people of the sort that are conscious*. We never put it that way, of course, because it never occurs to us to think that a non-conscious thing could be a person, as Chalmers is suggesting. It is as if the terms have been changed, and we are meant to take solace in how our old skeptical statements sound under these new meanings. The only way to take solace is to equivocate. Anyone who was ever worried about this:

> I don't know whether there are other people, because I might be in a tricky simulation created minutes ago!

Should be just as worried about this:

> I don't know whether other people are nonconscious parts of a simulation created minutes ago!

Nevertheless, that the currently standard formulation of the skeptical conclusion can be avoided, given structuralism, is still some progress in our understanding of the problem. We owe such progress not only to the nature of new simulation technology, but to one of the brilliant philosophical minds of our time working out its implications in *Reality+*.

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Games: Agency as Art by C Thi Nguyen (Oxford University Press, 2020).
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Many of us take great pleasure in playing games and spend considerable time doing so. For many people who play games, playing provides a sort of pleasure that feels unique, that other activities do not offer. At the same time, when we contemplate playing games, we can find ourselves in a state of mind from which games look like a waste of time. Playing games involves trying to do silly and pointless things, like putting balls through hoops, moving wooden tokens around boards, and pretending to manipulate physical objects within entirely virtual digital environments. When I

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propose to a friend that we play a game, I might wonder: why is this a worthwhile way to spend our time? Philosophers have answered this question in a variety of ways. Thomas Hurka[1] and Gwen Bradford[2] suggest that playing games is valuable because it is difficult, and so provides players with a valuable opportunity for achievement. Others, such as Miguel Sicart[3] and myself,[4] have claimed that playing games can be valuable because it can afford an experience of freedom or open-ended play that may not be readily available to us in ordinary life. C Thi Nguyen offers a novel and compelling answer to the question in *Games: Agency as Art* that draws from a rich, phenomenological account of game play and takes seriously the feeling of many players that games afford distinctive pleasures. Playing games – at least when we play them in a style that Nguyen calls 'striving play' – provides a distinctive aesthetic experience of harmony. Playing games brings out the beauty and grace of our actions because – unlike most of life – games are designed to elicit harmonious, graceful, and elegant choices and movements.

In contrast to 'achievement play', in which we play to try to win, in striving play, we try to win so as to have the experience of playing. Striving play involves what Nguyen calls a 'motivational inversion' of how we typically act. When we engage in striving play, our real objective is to engage in the process or experience of playing, but we 'temporarily put [our] real purposes out of mind'.[5] We instead take on 'disposable ends' (p. 27). These are ends that phenomenally appear to us as final and that temporarily guide our practical reasoning, 'occupy[ing] the forefront of [our] mental awareness' (p. 47), but that we can easily shed 'without doing significant damage to [our] enduring value system[s] or core practical identit[ies]' (p. 34). Adopting disposable ends in the context of striving play allows us to cultivate a sort of 'layered agency', in which we temporarily experience a certain 'focused way of being an agent' that involves focusing on ludic goals that are different from the goals that we focus on in our non-game lives (p. 79). When we engage in this layered form of agency, we phenomenally 'submerge' the ultimate reasons for our actions so that we

[1] 'Games and the Good', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80 (2006) 217–35.

[2] *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] *Play Matters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014).

[4] Jonathan Gingerich, 'Freedom and the Value of Games', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (2018) 831-49.

[5] C Thi Nguyen, 'The Opacity of Play: A Reply to Commentators', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 48 (2021), p. 449.

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can have a more immersive, engaged experience of the in-game goals that we are temporarily pursuing, such as trying to get a ball through a little hoop (p. 56). Notice that the layered agency of striving play requires us to enact different ways of being an agent at different times since, if we are genuinely engaged in striving play, we must at some point dispose of our disposable ends, at which point we are faced with an opportunity for agenda setting and re-evaluation when we decide whether to keep trying to get the ball through the hoop or whether instead to adopt a different disposable end or to step back in to the world of un-layered agency.

It is not only when we play games that we can have experiences of layered agency or disposable ends (p. 217). We enter a layered agency, for instance, whenever we play a role, like an institutional, professional, or relational role, insofar as that role involves taking on ends that are distinct from our enduring, central ends. But games are special because they allow us to easily change what our disposable ends are. If I am a lawyer, adopting the disposable end of zealously advocating for my client might be supported by weighty reasons concerning the administration of justice, so it might be difficult, unwise, or immoral to set the disposable end aside. But games can modify our disposable ends much more easily. Simply by specifying certain objectives that we need to pursue to play and win at a game (such as: try to move your token all the way around the board before the other players do), together with rules that govern how those objectives can be pursued, a game can cause us to experience a certain focused way of being an agent for the duration of the game. Games are 'the art of agency' because they manipulate our agency, prompting us to adopt disposable ends 'to create aesthetic experiences of agency' (p. 141).

Games' ability to modify our disposable ends, and so to modify the sorts of agency that players experience, accounts for much of the aesthetic significance of games, in Nguyen's view, and the aesthetic experiences afforded by games explain why we might wish to spend our time playing them rather than on less 'pointless' pursuits. Nguyen contends that in ordinary life, our abilities rarely suit the challenges that we face (p. 19). We experience discomfort and difficulty in life outside of games because we have 'inflexible values' like the values that we place on eating, finding romantic partners, and becoming professional philosophers (p. 19). We often can realise such values only by undertaking tasks that we find grating or stultifying (p. 19). Games provide an 'existential balm for our practical unease with the world' (p. 20). Games can do this because they present us with tasks and obstacles that are 'right-sized for our capacities' –

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that is, games are designed to make the experience of solving the problems that they present feel 'pleasurable, satisfying, interesting, and beautiful' (p. 20). In the ordinary world, we might wish to discover a cure for cancer but find that our intellectual capacities do not measure up to the task; in video games, to use Nguyen's example, players are provided with avatars that possess the abilities that they need to successfully navigate the obstacles that the game world presents to them (p. 20). Games thus provide us with the aesthetic experience of harmony between our '*overall capacities* and the demands of the practical environment' in a way that ordinary life does not (p. 109, emphasis in original). Games are particularly good at providing this experience because much of the disharmony that we experience outside of games comes from the 'dizzying plurality of values' that we must account for when we act in everyday life (p. 20). Games, in contrast, can make values clear and ensure that all players share the same values (for instance, by specifying – for every player – how to win).

The experience of the harmonious fit of our capacities to our tasks is not the only value promoted by playing games. Nguyen argues that games also promote our autonomy by providing a 'library of agencies' (p. 76). Whenever we play a game, we take on a different 'practical mode' – a narrowed practical focus associated with specific goals, like putting one's opponent in checkmate in chess (p. 82). Every practical mode is a different way that we might approach our agency, and games offer an easy way for us to try out these modes of agency. Because playing games and trying out these different ways of being an agent is easy, games are likely to expose us to a broader range of agential modes than we would be exposed to if we never played them. This enhances our autonomy because it allows us to develop a broader inventory of approaches for interacting with the world.

While the experience of harmony and the promotion of autonomy that games offer give us good reason to play games, Nguyen argues that games pose dangers, too. Much of the literature on the moral dangers of games has focused on representations of violence in games, especially video games. Nguyen persuasively argues that the larger moral danger might lie in games inducing us to 'gamify' parts of our lives outside of games (p. 200). The clarity of values that games offer us, to generate the aesthetic experience of harmony that they promise, might lead us to expect clarity in life outside of games, where values are plural and difficult to commensurate (p. 195). Games do not *necessarily* offer this experience of 'value clarity', but many do. In most games, it is easy to tell, for instance, if I have accumulated more points than my opponent or if the ball

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has gone into the goal (p. 198). That games often provide value clarity makes sense, since this sort of clarity conduces to the pleasurable sense of harmony that games can afford and that, Nguyen argues, is often absent from our messy lives outside of games. If we play a lot of games, we might come to expect this sort of clarity in non-game activities, and if this happens, we might be drawn to systems and institutions that 'closely resemble games', even if these systems are ethically inferior to systems that would require engaging with subtler values (p. 199).

Although Nguyen thinks that the dangers associated with games' value clarity are very serious, he is ultimately optimistic about striving play. This is because striving play can train us to extricate ourselves from our temporary agencies and to move easily and nimbly among different ways of engaging with the world. When we engage in striving play, we must practice moving back and forth between 'narrow' and 'wider' modes of agency. We take on a disposable end (and try to win) to make the process of playing possible. But when the game ends, we shift back to the more general perspective. Perhaps when we do so we will choose to play the same game again – or play a different game – but we must re-enter our wider agential mode at least long enough to make this decision. By its nature, then, striving play encourages us to wear our 'submersion [in narrow modes of agency] a little lightly' (p. 222). Developing this capacity can alleviate, but not eliminate, the danger that the 'narrowed state' of game play might spread to other areas of our lives (p. 218).

So, playing games in the mode of striving play is worthwhile because it often provides us with the aesthetic experience of the harmony of our capacities with our goals and enhances our agency by exposing us to a wider variety of agential modes than we might otherwise encounter. Playing games might lead to a disorder of our values, if we should come to expect to find the sort of clarity of value and purpose that games offer in our non-game life. But the practice of striving play can also make us less likely to find ourselves stuck in the narrowed sort of agency that is associated with such clarity.

As I understand Nguyen's argument, it relies on several important premises that, while plausible, are likely to be contested. Laying out some of these premises can, I hope, help to further illuminate Nguyen's theory. One important premise for Nguyen's argument is that agency has a centre or core that can be 'layered' with subordinate, temporary agencies while still controlling which sub-agencies we enter. I am persuaded by Nguyen that 'there are … many forms of

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desirable disunity in our agency' and that '[o]ur agency is not one that needs to be perpetually bathed in the light of its guiding core' (p. 61). But must our agency have a single guiding core? Can we know when we are inhabiting the core, rather than some subsidiary agency? If so, how can we know? I think that Nguyen's argument that games provide valuable experiences of clarity could succeed even if there were not such a 'core', although it seems that the argument might be more challenging. It would be interesting to hear how Nguyen thinks this argument might run for those whose understandings of the metaphysics of agency and the self differ from his.

An additional premise that Nguyen relies on is that the world outside of games only rarely provides the opportunity for our capacities to harmonise with our tasks. However, those who are sympathetic with, for example, Kant's view of the purposiveness of nature are likely to think that our capacity for judgment is particularly well-suited for the task of carrying out the scientific investigation of nature. Setting aside debates about the hospitality of nature to human capacities, I am unsure whether the world of human institutions outside of games is truly so inhospitable to our capacities. We might expect institutions designed by and for humans (aside from games) to often allow us to exercise our capacities in ways that harmoniously fit with the projects that these institutions set up for us. If human institutions fail to provide such opportunities for harmony, we might think this a rather contingent feature of how those institutions are arranged at present. We might think that, in a different but not too distant social and political world, we could find the world less alien and could (to use Nguyen's examples) find all that is involved in forming a romantic partnership or becoming a professional philosopher less onerous and distasteful. I do not think that Nguyen would necessarily disagree with this thought. As he points out, games might provide greater opportunities for agential harmony than can governments, since games can simply stipulate an end that their players must achieve to win while governments committed to liberal neutrality seek to avoid setting ends for their citizens (p. 157). But is this a point in favour of the unique ability of games to provide opportunities for the harmonious exercise of our agential capacities or is it a strike against liberal neutrality? I hope that Nguyen will explore this question in future work.

There is one further aspect of Nguyen's argument that I find difficult. Nguyen argues that games are particularly good at encoding 'clear' forms of agency, and that most games encode this sort of agency because it enables them to satisfy our desire for experiences of agential harmony. However, Nguyen also argues that games

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enhance our autonomy by providing us with exposure to a wider variety of agencies that we would otherwise encounter and that familiarity with more agential modes enables us to engage with the world more effectively. I worry that the 'library of agencies' to which games give us access might skew heavily in the direction of forms of agency that provide us with 'clear' values. I am hesitant to think that exposing ourselves to such a skewed archive of agencies will really enhance our autonomy – it might, instead, systematically push us in the direction of seeking greater value clarity and make us less familiar with more 'unclear' forms of agency than we would be if we never played games. Whether this sort of influence can undermine autonomy is a hotly debated question in ethics and political philosophy, and there is much that Nguyen might say to alleviate this concern, but it would be worth further exploring the relationship between the autonomy-enhancing features of games and their tendency toward value clarity.

Finally, it is worth noting that, throughout *Games* Nguyen works with Bernard Suits's definition of a game (pp. 5-6). For Suits, 'a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'.[6] On this definition, a very wide variety of activities *could* count as games if they were pursued in the right way, including 'business administration, jurisprudence, [and] philosophy.'[7] One of the great strengths of Nguyen's book is the multitude of highly textured examples of games and play that he provides. However, almost all of Nguyen's examples are of activities that we call 'games' in our ordinary language: 'computer games, team sports, solo sports, board games, card games, party games, tabletop role-playing games, and live-action role-playing games' (p. 23). Despite the focus of Nguyen's examples, I take nothing that he says to preclude his account from encompassing, say, the activity of philosophy when it is pursued as a Suitsian game in the mode of striving play. For readers who are intrigued by Nguyen's arguments but who are simply put off by the thought of games, it may be a helpful exercise to contemplate how Nguyen's account might incorporate examples of activities that involve the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles aside from those that we label as 'games' in ordinary language.

Nguyen's book is lively, provocative, and immensely rich. It includes important treatment of topics in aesthetics (for instance,

[6] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 41.

[7] Suits, *op cit* p. 176.

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its discussion of process arts) and ethics (such as its full discussion of 'layered' agency) that this review has barely touched on. In my view, *Games* is undoubtedly the most important philosophical monograph on games since Suits's 1978 *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. It also makes important contributions to aesthetics more broadly, ethics, and political philosophy. It is a delight to read.

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Gareth B. Matthews, The Child's Philosopher edited by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Laverty (New York: Routledge, 2022).
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Gareth B. Matthews, The Child's Philosopher (New York: Routledge, 2022) is the second volume in Routledge's Philosophy-for-Children Founders book series. Edited by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Laverty, this is a novel and welcome series. As the 10 enthusiastic endorsers of the Matthews work insist at the beginning of the volume, this is a book well worth reading. It celebrates Matthews' pioneering efforts to find a solid place for children in the world of philosophical inquiry, including parts of that world that, until quite recently, have failed to recognize and value what children can contribute to it. The book includes many of Matthews' original essays that explain and support his work in support of the natural philosophical curiosity of children and the loss both children and adults suffer when this curiosity is not recognized and valued. It also provides accounts of the broad range and considerable depth of Matthews' contributions in other, more established areas of philosophy (such as Ancient and Medieval philosophy and philosophy of language).

Marked by what he identifies as whimsy, children's philosophical thinking is expressed in much children's literature (such as Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad stories). Matthews devoted nearly 60 concise articles in *Thinking* (the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children's (IAPC) official periodical) over a period of more than 20 years that carefully discuss philosophical dimensions

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