COVERAGE SHORTFALLS AT THE LIBRARY OF AGENCY

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In "Games and the Art of Agency," C. Thi Nguyen makes an intriguing and very plausible suggestion: games, or at any rate a great many of them, are artworks whose medium is, roughly, how one goes about doing what one does.[1] In assigning an objective, laying down the constraints under which it has to be achieved, and specifying the terrain on which it will be played out, a game sculpts the decision-making processes of its players, the ways they see their environment and option space, their motivations, and much else. Thus our by now quite extensive repertoire of games constitutes a *library of agency*. This library allows us to try on different modes of agency before deciding which is best for us—for a given type of occasion, or generally. It can help educate us into unfamiliar forms of agency by providing the sort of controlled exercises that allow beginners the practice they need, which is to say that games are exercise and preparation for autonomous agency. And it promises to broaden and enrich our philosophical treatments of the topic, in part by serving as a testbed for competing theories of practical rationality; if we want to get a realistic sense of what it would be like to decide what to do, in the way that one or another theory of practical deliberation says, we can experiment with it in an appropriately designed game.[2]

All of this seems on target to me, and an important step forward for, especially, the ongoing discussion of practical reasoning. However, in availing ourselves of this very valuable resource, it is important to remain aware of

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1 Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency." The ideas are further developed in Nguyen, *Games*.

2 The recent back and forth about constitutivism is focused on the question of what agency essentially is, the presumption being that agency is *one* thing. See, for instance, Ferrero, "Constitutivism and the Inescapability of Agency"; for an overview of the action-theoretic variant of that debate, see Millgram, "Practical Reason and the Structure of Actions." Nguyen's treatment obviously pulls in a very different direction, but here we will not need to take up the question of whether there are aspects of the way one goes about doing things that are simply nonoptional.

its limitations, and so those are what I will be highlighting here. The point is neither to object to Nguyen's view, nor even to suggest that he has overlooked the issues I will be raising; on the contrary, some of them are central to his own discussion, and others he acknowledges in passing. Rather, I mean to contribute a helpful reminder to what might one day evolve into a user guide for the library of agency.

<div align="center">I</div>

Although my very terse summary confined itself to the aspects of Nguyen's argument that bear most directly on work on agency itself, his essay is first and foremost a contribution to the philosophy of art, identifying a largely over-looked and underappreciated class of artworks. Works of art are produced and consumed for their aesthetic properties, and perhaps the entry ticket for the class—the aesthetic property that keeps a game in the library of agency—is *playability*. Pausing for a moment on that concept, by introducing it as an aesthetic property, that is, in the same logical family as, say, beauty or uncanniness, I mean to distinguish it both from what it takes, formally, for an activity to count as gameplay at all, and also from being simply enjoyable to play (although I do not mean to discount the presumptive links between the three conditions). If the analogy helps, a film may be unwatchable even though it is possible to watch it, and it may be compellingly watchable despite being morbidly unpleasant; important documentaries on difficult topics tend to fall into this latter category, and conversely, to foreshadow our next step, unwatchable documentaries all too easily end up being unimportant.

If games are works of art, then to the extent that there are forms which agency can take in the wild that make for unappealing play, the modes of agency induced by games will be unrepresentative of agency across the board. That is, the library of agency should be expected to exhibit *playability bias*.[3] Consider some of the ways in which the mix of agencies invoked by games will diverge from what we ought to find in the wild.

First and foremost, when someone sits down with you to introduce you to a new game, they will almost always start out by telling you what the objective

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3   Since not all artworks are games, this is going to be a special case of a presumably more general phenomenon: there will be aesthetics-driven selection effects across the arts, with upshots for the uses that get made of artworks. For instance, we should be suspicious when moral philosophers appeal to snippets from famous works of fiction. What made the work famous? No doubt (although *inter alia*) its aesthetics, and we should be asking: What are we *not* going find in novels, because people would be very unlikely to want to read a novel like *that*?

of the game is—say, to checkmate your opponent's king. There are perhaps exceptions (think of *Minecraft* or *The Sims*), but games for the most part come with goals.[4] And goals are a distinguishing feature of the class of games that take center stage in Nguyen's discussion, those that are occasions for "striving play": the attempt to achieve a designated objective in the face of specified constraints and impediments, for the sake of the experience of doing so.

Two features of the way the objective of a game figures into it matter for our purposes. One, *all* of the in-game activity is to be directed toward achieving the objective of the game. For instance, if one of the players positions their pawns and rooks in an elegant pattern, not for the sake of the win but because that strikes them as a pretty way to arrange the board, they are no longer really playing chess. And two, the objective of the game is not negotiable; you do not, in the course of a game of chess, propose that perhaps instead of checkmating the king, it would suffice to weaken his armies and render them nonthreatening— or that it should be enough if bad publicity makes the king into a lame duck.

Because this will be a controversial claim, right now I neither want to insist on it, nor be detained by it. Nonetheless, it does seem to me that an important aspect of agency in the wild is figuring out what matters and what is important, and thus what one's goals or objectives are to be.[5] Deliberation of ends, as the old-school way of speaking designates it, is often a frustrating endeavor; there is no cut-and-dried procedure that gets you the right answer, and it is typically hard to tell that you *have* gotten the right answer. Consequently, people often will not agree on whether that sort of question has been successfully resolved. If

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4   "Perhaps": this is a tricky question, and taking *Minecraft* as our illustration, first distinguish its "creative" and "survival" modes, the latter being an overlay of much more traditional game structure, goals and all, on the former. If we confine ourselves to that creative mode, which was what made *Minecraft* so popular in the first place, in its pure form it is something on the order of virtual Lego.

Now, and here is a suggestive distinction drawn from ordinary language, when we say that a child is playing with Lego, we do not say that they are playing a *game*—rather, they are playing with a *toy*. (As a matter of "grammar," as an old-school, ordinary-language philosopher might say it, what you do with a game is play it, but not all play is taking part in a game.) We do call *Minecraft* a "game," but apparently that is mostly a matter of commercial near-convention: recreational software is categorized this way even when the recreational activity it enables would not, if off-device, be considered playing a game. (For very helpful guidance from a native informant, I am grateful to Abie Millgram.)

5   I argue that we have to learn what matters from experience in *Practical Induction*, and survey the state of play in the instrumentalism debate as of about the turn of the millennium in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*. Vogler makes what is still the best case in the literature for (a nuanced version of) the opposing view: that actions have to be directed toward objectives, and that practical reasons that are not generated by objectives are entirely optional (*Reasonably Vicious*).

only because that makes it hard to score, it is quite understandable that deliberation of ends does not generally figure into the demands that a game—anyway, a game that most people could enjoy—makes on its players.

In addition, people generally seem to have an appetite for vicarious activity that is solely end driven, and where the ends themselves are not up for reconsideration; witness not just games, but the many genres of popular fiction in which readers identify with a protagonist who strenuously overcomes obstacles in order to attain some antecedently given objective. (There are many variations on the structural theme: he must defuse the bomb, or win the affections of a romantic interest …) The appetite for single-minded, goal-driven activity in real life is much more muted; when it is not a game, we are much more liable to take a relaxed approach to our goals, procrastinate, and generally let other issues influence our choices and the way we execute them. But playability is enhanced when a game caters to a deeply rooted appetite, and we should anticipate that our repertoire of games will induce and exercise by and large only modes of agency from which—again, if I am right about what is a controversial topic—two significant aspects of agency in the wild have been excised.[6]

II

In Bill Watterson's deservedly famous comic strip, the child plays "Calvinball," a game where you make up the rules as you go. But while Calvin is playing, he

6   The instrumentalism debate is focused on whether you can reason about what your final ends are to be, rather than the possibility of activity that is not structured around ends or goals at all. It does seem to me that this latter is a possibility we should be taking very seriously, and the alternative control structure that we perhaps understand the best is the feedback loop (see, e.g., Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, ch. 1). It is quite plausible that games built around feedback loops rather than goals can be playable, gripping, and even addictive; so while they are not a focus of Nguyen's discussion, we can bank on finding this sort of agency well represented within the agential library.

Bowman introduces an agential posture that is oriented toward "aspirations" rather than goals; although superficially similar, we expect, if we are at all self-aware, to abandon our aspirations long before they are achieved, and when we do we will not count that as failure (*Are Our Goals Really What We're After?*). When we abandon our goals, that *is* failure; our aspirations, Bowman argues, have a very different cognitive function, and the ways we pick them up and drop them make Bowman's aspirations resemble Nguyen's disposable ends in important respects.

Notice, however, that Bowmanian aspirations are unlikely to lend themselves to rewarding game play. Imagine a would-be game that, instead of objectives, had aspirations: rather than saying to the novice player, "The objective of the game is to checkmate the king" (something you could actually do), they say, "Your aspiration is to checkmate the king, and as the game goes on, you can anticipate that you will just give up on that, and keep playing, but with a new aspiration, which you will also give up…." Who would want to play *that*?

is not playing a *game*; Wittgenstein's observations about family-resemblance concepts notwithstanding, we expect games to come with rules. Be the formal point as it may, for the Suitsian gameplay that is the focus of Nguyen's discussion to be possible, a game must come with something that anyway serves the purpose of rules here, that of complicating and impeding what would otherwise be the too-straightforward achievement of the objective of the game.[7] To serve that function, the rules (or whatever does the job, but I will continue to refer to whatever it turns out to be as rules) must also be nonnegotiable, in much the way that the objective of the game is.[8] If someone asks his opponent whether he can move his pawn like a knight *just this once*, not only has he has given up on playing chess, he is eliciting something on the order of a disappointed sigh.

However, one of the more fraught but also unavoidable activities in life as we have to live it is renegotiating the rules.[9] If you are reading this essay, you are probably an analytic philosopher; in that case, you are working in a tradition that was produced when its founders did a drastic reset of the rules for philosophizing, and since that time, within that tradition, the rules of the game have been renegotiated on a fairly regular basis. For instance, part of that initial reset was the flat-out rejection of the coherentist arguments that had been the stock in trade of Russell's and Moore's British Idealist predecessors. That mode of argumentation has been reclaimed throughout analytic philosophy, sometimes under the label "reflective equilibrium," sometimes in a Davidsonian, and sometimes in a Lewisian accent.[10] If you *are* an analytic philosopher, you are a participant in a practice an essential part of which is renegotiating the rules of that very practice, and while the illustration is in some respects exotic, the phenomenon can be found throughout our social life.

Moreover, there are a good many occasions on which we are no longer in the business of adjusting the rules, or even substituting new rules for old, but rather of ignoring or systematically violating them. Revolution and civil disobedience are dramatic and large-scale examples that come in for attention on the part of political philosophers, and there are also unfortunately too many people who

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7   Watterson, *It's a Magical World*, 101; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, secs. 66–71; Suits, *The Grasshopper*.

8   An observation that also requires qualification: the rules of a game can be changed, and recently we witness games being modified regularly, e.g., by the addition of new entities that alter the physics or landscape of a virtual world. But the players themselves do not generally get to adjust the rules in the course of a given game.

9   For a disconcerting illustration at perhaps the largest scale, see Millgram, "The Persistence of Moral Skepticism and the Limits of Moral Education."

10 And perhaps adjustments in this direction were inevitable, for reasons sketched in Millgram, "Relativism, Coherence, and the Problems of Philosophy."

will tell you that all's fair in love and war, but lower-key examples make it clear that this is a pervasive and basic aspect of agency. Just for instance, a great many of the novels or poems covered in a literature class are likely to have run rough-shod over the constitutive rules of the genre in which they place themselves.

Briefly, disregarding or altering the metaphorical rules of the game in real time is an indispensable mode of agency. In games, or anyway the games that are the focus of Nguyen's discussion, the literal rules of the game cannot be disregarded, and they cannot be altered within the course of the game itself. Consequently, this mode of agency will also not be properly represented in a library of agency whose card catalog is confined to the Dewey Decimal 793–796 range.

We can now introduce an important complication. It is very plausible that the relevant form of connoisseurship, developed as one deliberates with one's gaming companions about what game to play next, exercises the aspects of agency we have been worried were missing from the library. Thinking about why we were not happy with last night's game, and what we should try instead, is likely to involve deliberation of ends. While you do take the rules for granted while you play a game—and thus games do train you, in one way, in accept-ing the rules in force as a given—choosing among games ought to hone your awareness that there are alternative sets of rules, and that you can move between them. Thus a connoisseur of games is training himself not to take the rules of a game as given, in a different way.[11] The use of the library of agency as a whole—one's engagement with it as a *library*—compensates for what is not actually on its shelves. And perhaps this mutes the concerns about playability bias we have been developing.

This seems right to me as far as it goes, and we will return to the point below. But when we are considering *bias*, we need to bear in mind not just how resources *can* be used, but how they are most *predominantly* used. Consider for a moment actual libraries, the ones stocked with books. No doubt engaging a library as a *library*, as a whole—browsing the stacks, exploring the many resources it offers, consulting with the librarians—develops skills and attitudes you do not necessarily come by just reading one or another book. But now, how often do you see this sort of engagement? For the most part, users take the fastest shortcut they can find to the volume they need. To think about the effects of libraries as institutions, and in particular about the way libraries shape the habits and dispositions of readers, will likely turn out to be, by and large, to think about how reading one after another book influences typical patrons.

III

Reasoning is *defeasible* when you would be correct in drawing a conclusion from the premises you have, but there are further things you might learn, or simply additional considerations that might come to mind, none of which would impugn those premises, but that would require you to retract the conclusion: supplemental information or assessment can *defeat* the inference.[12] As I type this, I am on the road, but in quarantine, imposed as part of the Israeli government's attempt to slow the progress of the coronavirus epidemic. My reasons for taking the trip were perfectly satisfactory support for the decision to embark on it, but they would quite properly have been overridden had I realized that I was going to spend my time in self-isolation. That is, the argument for taking my trip was defeasible, and one of the many potential defeaters for it has turned out, belatedly, actually to defeat it. Deductive inference guarantees the truth of its conclusions, given the truth of the premises; reasoning that is not deductive is defeasible; practical reasoning—to a first approximation, reasoning about what to do—is defeasible through and through, perhaps with negligible exceptions.[13]

Unsurprisingly, a player's deliberations in the course of a game are typically defeasible as well. ("Typically": in some extremely rigidly structured games, the argument for making one or another move can be put into deductive form.) During sheepdog trials, perhaps the border collie can hear her handler's whistle, telling her to bring that tiny flock down and left, taking them through the next obstacle on the course; but close up, and interacting directly with this particularly ornery group of sheep on an especially hot day, she is aware that pressing them in that direction will likely make them break and run. In such circumstances, the collie on a winning team overrides her master's defeasible inference, skips the panel, and brings the sheep directly to the shedding ring.

Despite the appearance of shared structure, however, defeasibility management in the world of games differs deeply from what agency in the wild has to muster up. In the real world, defeating conditions for an inference-in-waiting can come from just about *anywhere*. Who *knew* that epidemiology and public

12 Defeasibility travels under various labels: in philosophy of science, discussion centers on *ceteris paribus*—or "other things equal"—generalizations; in AI, this sort of reasoning is *nonmonotonic*. For overviews, see Reutlinger, Schurz, and Hüttemann, "*Ceteris Paribus* Laws"; Horty, *Reasons as Defaults*; and Hlobil, "Choosing Your Nonmonotonic Logic."

13 For a more leisurely introduction to defeasibility in practical inference, and support for that last claim, see Millgram, *The Great Endarkenment*, sec. 6.2. A delicate point that I will not develop further here: in generalizing the contrast between deductive and defeasible to cover practical reasoning, we will want to broaden the thumbs-up status of a premise or conclusion. There is no agreement on how the relevant statuses of steps of a practical argument are to be construed, but insisting that they are true or false is evidently procrustean.

health policy were going to bear on decisions about plane tickets and speaking engagements? But of course opting to take the trip would properly have been preempted by any number of conditions, had they proved to obtain: a pet emergency, an impossible-to-turn-down collaboration with a very tight deadline, the conference turning out to be academically disreputable, or the sudden discovery that a particular manufacturer's aircraft are prone to falling out of the sky . . . Lists of potential defeaters for a nondeductive argument are not only generally open ended; they pose a distinctive challenge, that of noticing the surprising ways that entirely unanticipated facts or evaluations can be relevant to a pending choice.

Defeasibility inside games is by contrast narrowly constrained. The objective of the game, together with the constraints imposed on meeting it, determine what counts as a salient defeater: defeating conditions *cannot* come from just anywhere. That your queen might be endangered if you move your rook is a legitimate defeater, but that castles are ugly vestiges of feudal social structure is not; that the day is too hot for your border collie to complete the course at full speed is something you can reasonably consider in deciding whether to stick to the drill, but that bringing her around to the stands would allow you to show her off to your family and friends is not. In-game defeaters are anchored in the objectives and the rules of the game, which a player is apprised of up front, whereas defeating conditions for inference conducted in the out-of-game world might, for all one knows, be anchored in just *anything*. Thus in-game agency requires a more minimal kind of attention to defeating conditions, one that does not make the qualitatively remarkable over-the-top demands that inference imposes on reasoners in the wild. Putting that point the other way around, the library of agency is unlikely to prepare us for—or prepare us to *understand*—full-fledged defeasibility management.

If the library of agency is stocked with games, then the library's accession policies select for playability. Nguyen emphasizes the importance for playability of fit between the challenges that a game poses and the abilities it bestows on the players: games are fun to play when they are neither too easy, nor exercises in futility.[14] But defeasibility, if I am understanding the phenomenon rightly, is a mark of a deep mismatch between the complexity of the world, and thus of

14 But this is another observation that requires a complicated qualification. A great deal of what we do in our lives is boring routine, and so much of what we have to do does not nearly engage the abilities we are able to marshal. Surely here we will find another massive lacuna in the library of agency: How many games are going to reproduce the endless commutes, tedious errands, and all the rest of it?

   I think that is correct, but the claim requires contouring. A great many quite undemanding games have the function of (merely) keeping one occupied: think solitaire, *Tetris*, and the seemingly endless variants on jewel-matching games. That said, while undemanding, they differ substantially in agential structure from the tasks that characteristically make

the problems it poses for the agents in it, and human competences. We can nei-
ther adequately represent the problem spaces we face, nor calculate the way our
actions will play out in them, and so we need to anticipate the fact that, no matter
how hard we try, we can all too easily turn out to have overlooked one or another
vital consideration. To make room in our logic for having overlooked indefinitely
many vital considerations is to treat inference and reasoning as defeasible. So it is
no accident that Nguyen's library of agency gives short shrift to this aspect of it.[15]

As before, there is a complication to introduce: perhaps the experience of a
game to which you are new allows you to experience something like the surpris-
ingness of defeasibility in the wild.[16] There is something to this, but the point
only carries so far, at least if you find plausible another admittedly controver-
sial view that I will not now defend, but just put on the table. In the world at
large, you have to learn what matters from experience, and there are no *a priori*
boundaries we can place on what you might discover to be important—or
unimportant. In the game of life, it is not that you know what winning *would*
be . . . but then there are surprises about what it takes to get there and what you
need to pay attention to on the way. Life would be a very different matter if it
came with a rule book that told you what counted as a successful finish.

In a striving game, it cannot happen that you come to understand that the
objective of the game is to be simply disregarded; even if a game is new to
you, you know *a priori*, so to speak, that however surprising the connections
you need to make, moves in the game are to be adjudged by their relevance to
that objective. And that is the case even if, as in *Bag on the Head* (a party game
that turns up in Nguyen's fascinating discussion), winning the game does not
matter. In a game, there can turn out to be intermediate objectives that one
does not initially realize are called for by the objective of the game, and these

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up the background processes of everyday life: people play *Jewel Crush* in waiting rooms
precisely because one's agential configuration *qua* player and *qua* waiting are *different*.

15 Although it is important to have this point in front of us, I want to emphasize that this is
not an issue Nguyen himself overlooks. On the contrary, and laying out his train of thought,
in a game, agents act strategically, on the basis of their own self-interest, as that is defined
by the scoring rules for the game. Most of real life is hard to face up to because it is not like
this; not only is your own self-interest not transparent to you, there is no presumption that
other agents share your priorities and objectives. So once we have Nguyen's characteriza-
tion of games on the plate, it is suddenly clear that moral theory, as analytic philosophers
practice it (but it is not just them), is for the most part the very same fantasy of moral
clarity purveyed by games, only less enjoyably packaged; it is suddenly clear that the sort
of economic theory that we learn in that introductory econ class is a theory of decision
making inside a video game, but not an account of choice in real life. This reframing sets
an extensive and novel agenda for moral theory.

16 Once again, the point is due to Nguyen himself.

intermediate ends can give rise to surprises about what defeaters are relevant to some course of action you are considering within the game. In life as we live it, however, you can notice that something matters, in a way you had over-looked, and not because it serves some goal or other you are pursuing; rather, in view of what you can now see to be important, you may begin rethinking what your goals—your ultimate goals—are to be. That is, the intellectual demands imposed by defeasibility, in games and out in the world, differ in the direction they can require your thoughts to move: within a game, to notice a defeater is to notice a connection to an already given objective; in life, one can come by a new objective—a new final end, as the jargon has it—by noticing a defeater.

However, to the extent that a game you are just learning your way around does simulate the surprises you can encounter in real life, it tells us something about what drives defeasibility—namely, that to live life is to encounter the unfamiliar. If you had, as Andrew Marvell once put it, "world enough and time," not to mention the computational power, to familiarize yourself with every-thing there is, that sort of defeasibility would presumably gradually vanish. And since it never does vanish, what is made vivid by this qualification is how much the world is always new and unfamiliar to us.

<p style="text-align:center">IV</p>

Turning to a fourth area in which the library's coverage is likely to be minimal, one of the very exciting contributions made by Nguyen's piece is the observation that, in playing a game for the sake of the experience of overcoming the obstacles to a goal (striving play, as opposed to "achievement play"), we adopt throwaway ends. This is an important contribution to the theory of practical rationality precisely in that it brings into view a hitherto neglected mode of agency.

But this mode of agency will also rarely or never appear *within* a game—as opposed to being invoked in order to enter the game in the first place. It is not that we cannot imagine a game in which a player must pause for a game within a game. ("In order you proceed, you must challenge Death to a game of chess!") But because the demands of playability so strongly impress objective-oriented structure on games, a game within a game will be played as a step toward the organizing end of the game it is in; that is, it will prompt achievement play rather than striving play. The rules of the game will not tell players to take time out to play another game, purely for the enjoyment of that game itself, rather than in order to advance toward the goal set by the top-level game. A game that did make the demand would be lackadaisical, and so annoying rather than gripping. Accordingly, the very mode of agency that is Nguyen's dramatic

contribution to the theory of agency and of practical rationality is not itself represented in the library of agency we are now considering.

There is a second layer to the problem. A precondition of agents inserting themselves into a game by taking on the objectives it specifies is someone having made up the game in the first place. That is, inventing games is something that agents do, and while I do not know that the activity counts as a natural kind within the world of agency, the categories under which it is natural to subsume it—invention more generally, one would think—look different, and are responded to differently, inside games. Consider *Sign*, described in Nguyen's essay, a game in which invention plays a prominent role or, again, the ingenuity that has been devoted at one time or another to coming up with new chess openings. Genuine invention introduces novelty; what is genuinely novel is likely to fit whatever concepts and rules one already has to hand poorly; scoring rules deploy the concepts one has to hand when they are being laid down. So for a game that demands invention to be playable, the novelty it elicits cannot be scored directly; certainly to adopt anything like the stance of a Nobel Prize committee within a game would make it confusing and frustrating. Instead, we score the cleanly designated objectives that the novelty is to promote: checkmates, in chess; successfully transmitting a given message, in *Sign*.

This means that in-game invention is in the service of previously designated objectives.[17] Now in the world at large, the most impressive innovations are, often enough, not too closely tied to antecedently available targets, and that is true of games as well: the games that are most likely to evoke novel forms of agency are also more likely to be products of the more freewheeling, less goal-focused modes of deliberation. So we should be concerned about the aspects of agency exercised in the course of inventing games being underrepresented within the library of agency.

<div align="center">v</div>

When we engage in striving play, Nguyen points out, we adopt ends for the sake of the experience of struggling to achieve them, and he takes time out to push back against an anticipated objection, that these are not really the agent's *ends*, but rather some sort of second-rate imitation. Suppose that is right: we ought *not* to think in terms of a two-tier system, containing the properly so-called ends that agents adopt for real reasons, and then also the mimic ends they take on merely in play. Then in my view there is a possibility that it is methodologically important

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17   But as discussed above, one can not only play games—one can play *with* them, as one does in *Minecraft*, or when making maps for other players, as in *Halo*.

to leave open and explore to the fullest—namely, that *all* of our final ends are ulti-
mately underwritten by the capacities that make it possible for us to play games.
Perhaps we take the goals that structure our lives seriously in the same manner
that we take the goals that structure our games seriously, but because we have
been immersed in our own lives for so long, we forget that this is where they came
from, and that life is much more like a game than we for the most part imagine.[18]

Taking a sizable step back, we can see moral psychology to owe an account
of how we arrive at our driving concerns, and also at the constraints—in the
familiar language of Harry Frankfurt, the "practical necessities"—that channel
the pursuit of our ends, and more generally our responses to those concerns.
(If the term is new to you, a mark of a practical necessity is someone telling
you that what you are asking them to do is unthinkable, and *simply* out of the
question.[19]) We could not have been originally argued into them, and that is
not just a belittling remark about the intellectual capacities of children. Traf-
fic in reasons is itself constrained by its own rules, of that game as it were;
it is directed sometimes by goals, and more generally by concerns that must
themselves be acquired.[20] Our experience of the force of laws of logic is itself
a practical necessity that is part of what is to be explained here, and so cannot
be appealed to as the basis for that explanation.

Moreover, our society has in the past few centuries become very highly spe-
cialized. Inculcation into one of the disciplines that make up its fabric involves
internalizing the priorities, standards, ideals, and guidelines that govern activity
within it, and we cannot, for the most part, acquire these by being argued into
them, either. These areas of expertise develop their own proprietary intellec-
tual tools—concepts, first and foremost, but not only—and so the standards,
etc., that must articulated using these tools cannot so much as be expressed by
someone who has not gone through the requisite apprenticeship. That makes
it hard to see how an argument for those standards, priorities, etc., could even
be intelligible to an outsider.[21]

Nguyen is providing us with the ingredients of the sort of explanation we
need. (To be clear, I am pressing his view in a direction I am not myself sure he
wants to go.) Both in the course of one's upbringing and, subsequently, in the
course of the training that makes a specialist out of a layperson, we summon up
the dispositions that allow us to inhabit games. We find ourselves assuming the

18   For the methodological imperative, compare the remarks in Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and
      Evil*, sec. 36.
19   Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, chs. 7, 13.
20   What might such concerns be, if not goals? For a start on the alternatives, see Millgram,
      "On Being Bored out of Your Mind."
21   The problems here are spelled out at greater length in Millgram, *The Great Endarkenment*.

mantle of ends, constraints, and so on that we are offered, with verbal guidance and other prompting; the picture is one in which immersion in a game captures, in sharpened form, the central aspects of immersion in life. And the picture reminds us that seriousness and playfulness are not mutually exclusive—on the contrary.

But if games are to be our model for our engagement with life itself, it is all the more important to keep track of the ways in which games are unrepresentative of agency across the board. Although life and games perhaps share an underlying source of motivation and commitment, they differ in being, respectively, conducted in an in-principle wide-open field of action, and in one that is closed off by its designated borders.

To reiterate, the issues I have been reviewing are not meant as criticism or complaints. In my view, Nguyen has done us a real service by identifying an important theoretical and practical resource. But it is important to be aware of its limitations, and that reminder has especial urgency for philosophers: as we know, when you give philosophers a new tool, it does not take very long for some of them to start insisting that anything you cannot do with that tool does not matter, and often enough they will start to insist that anything else literally does not exist. Put more abstractly, methods get reified into ontologies, and so if you lose track of the limitations of a method, it is all too easy to end up with impaired vision. But keeping the limitations of a new method in mind from the get-go can forestall that outcome. And that is why I have been attempting to supplement Nguyen's eye-opening observation, that we have at hand a library of agency made up of games, with the reminders about shortfalls in coverage assembled here.[22]

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