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Freedom and the value of games

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores the features in virtue of which games are valuable or worthwhile to play. The difficulty view of games holds that the goodness of games lies in their difficulty: by making activities more complex or making them require greater effort, they structure easier activities into more difficult, therefore more worthwhile, activities. I argue that a further source of the value of games is that they provide players with an experience of freedom, which they provide both as paradigmatically unnecessary activities and by offering opportunities for relatively unconstrained choice inside the 'lusory' world that players inhabit.

1. Introduction

What makes playing games – board games, computer games, role playing games and so forth – valuable or worthwhile? Many activities are valuable because they aim at some valuable end or because they are required by duty, but, by their nature, games aim at trivial ends (like capturing all of an opponent's checkers) and are played 'for fun' rather than out of duty. So what, if anything, makes playing games a worthwhile activity? The difficulty view of games argues that the goodness of games lies in their difficulty. Two leading proponents of the difficulty view, Hurka (2006) and Bradford (2015), have different views about what makes an activity difficult – for Hurka difficulty is a matter of an activity's complexity, while for Bradford it is a matter of the amount of intense effort that an activity requires. Both, however, think that games are valuable because they structure less difficult activities into more difficult and therefore more worthwhile activities. A game turns something easy – like putting a ball through a relatively small hoop – into something hard – like scoring a basket in a game of basketball. The difficulty view captures an important feature of how games

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succeed, but it narrows the standards of success too much. While it is true that we often want the games we play to be hard and feel a sense of achievement when we accomplish something difficult, an important part of the value of games is their ability to provide their players with an experience of freedom. Games provide this experience of freedom both as paradigmatically unnecessary activities and by providing opportunities for relatively unconstrained choice inside the lusory world that players inhabit when they play.

I develop my argument through, first, a conceptual analysis of games that relies on Bernard Suits's canonical definition of games and, second, a description of the phenomenology of games that provide their players with an experience of freedom using a variety of formal techniques. I then argue that the difficulty view should be amended to reflect the centrality of the experience of freedom to the value of games: while difficulty is a feature of most good games, games can also be good in another dimension understood in terms of the sort of freedom that they offer to players. Finally, I suggest that the experience of freedom in playing a game has the potential to provide larger social advantages beyond the benefits that games provide to individual players.

2. The difficulty view

Why do we admire people who play games well, even though games concern trivial ends? The difficulty view argues that we admire achievements, and that what makes achievements valuable is, in large part, their difficulty. One variant of the difficulty view, advanced by Hurka, regards the difficulty of games as a matter of 'how complex or physically challenging they are, or how much skill and ingenuity they require' (Hurka 2006, 221). Another variant, advanced by Bradford, regards difficulty as a matter of how much intense effort an activity requires and how long the intense effort lasts (Bradford 2015, 49). For both variants of the difficulty view, a bad game is one that is insufficiently difficult, like tic-tac-toe, while a good game is one that is hard to succeed at, like chess, and the value of playing games lies in their difficulty. I focus on Hurka's articulation of the difficulty view, rather than Bradford's, because Hurka aims explicitly to account for what makes games valuable, while Bradford aims primarily to explain the nature and value of achievement.

Like many contemporary philosophers of games, Hurka begins with the conceptual framework provided by Bernard Suits, who defines a game as the 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 1990, 41). Suitsian game players regards their playing of a game (although not their decisions within a game) as not necessitated in advance for, if they saw their playing as predetermined, they could not regard it as voluntary. They also regard their playing of a game as intrinsically worthwhile, because one plays a game for its own sake rather than as an instrument for some further end (Suits 1990, 172).

Hurka largely accepts Suits's definition, but he focuses his argument more narrowly on the particular sort of game-play that Suits argues would constitute the primary activity of a utopia, which is play 'for its own sake' (Suits 1990, 144, 166; Hurka 2006, 227). Thus, Hurka does not focus on games played by professionals. Professionals can play *games*, provided that they accept the rules of the game in order to play it (Suits 1990, 146); however, such professionals are not engaged in the narrower activity of *game-play* unless they are engaged in that activity *for its own sake*.[1]

Hurka also begins with the premises that more difficult activities are more valuable than less difficult ones and that difficulty is primarily a matter of complexity. 'More complex means-end relations make for more value in achievement' because such activities are harder to succeed at and require a greater degree of deliberative skill to monitor how sub-activities conduce to the achievement of an overarching goal (Hurka 2006, 224).[2]

Hurka further argues that the exclusive source of games' value is their difficulty, arguing that 'when two activities are equally complex and difficult' (their complexity and difficulty being a source of their intrinsic value), an activity that 'produces an intrinsically good result' is superior in value to one that does not (Hurka 2006, 233). So, 'political activity that liberates an entire nation from oppression' is of greater value (in at least one respect), and is due greater honor and admiration, than winning a chess tournament (Hurka 2006, 233). Overthrowing a tyrant is of greater value than defeating a chess champion because it is both instrumentally better, in that it produces a separate intrinsic good, and intrinsically better on that basis. Hurka argues for this conclusion using Derek Parfit's example of someone who spends her life trying to preserve Venice's canals. On Hurka's view, if, after that person's death, Venice is preserved as a result of her efforts the person will have achieved something difficult. For this reason, her life will have been better and more valuable than if Venice were destroyed (Hurka 2006, 233).

Hurka claims that there are two grounds for this conclusion. First, realizing the topmost goal in a hierarchy adds value to that hierarchy by making it more complicated. But if we consider activities that are *truly* equivalent in complexity, we are left with Hurka's second ground: 'when an activity aimed at a valuable end successfully achieves that end and therefore is instrumentally good, its being instrumentally good is an extra source of intrinsic value' (Hurka 2006, 233). If I work at a difficult activity that has an intrinsically valuable end, like sending the dictator packing, and I achieve that end, my activity is more difficult and valuable than it would have been if I had worked at the same activity and it failed or if I had succeed at an activity that were equally difficult but had a trivial end. Because of the general principle that if something is intrinsically good then 'desiring, pursuing, and taking pleasure in it for that property, is also, and separately, intrinsically good' (Hurka 2006, 228), aiming at

and achieving an independently valuable end adds to the *intrinsic* value of the activity that aims at this end.

Thus in Hurka's view, (1) games are valuable because they transform less difficult (and complex) activities into more difficult (and complex) activities, (2) more difficult (and complex) games are better than less difficult (and complex) games, and (3) a game (undertaken solely for its intrinsic value) is less valuable than an activity of exactly equivalent difficulty (and complexity) that aims at and achieves an independently valuable end.[3]

3. The openness of games

The difficulty view is counterintuitive in some respects. Many game scholars find Suits's definition of games unsatisfying because of its strained accounts of game-playing by professionals and of games that players are not clearly trying to win, like playing 'house' (Nguyen 2017b, 6). Nonetheless, Suits's definition clearly captures some of the most important features of games: their rule-boundedness, voluntariness, and removal from everyday life. Because it provides a promising, if procrustean, approach to understanding games, and because of its prominence in philosophical literature and games studies literature, I accept and work within Suits's definition for the remainder of this essay. Like Hurka, I also focus my argument narrowly on game-play undertaken 'for its own sake,' rather than professional play.

In this section, I argue that – even if one source of games' value lies in their difficulty – another significant source of the value of games is the opportunity that they provide to their players of participating in an activity that is not required by any duty or reason. Although the activity of playing a game does not *aim* directly at this experience, the fact that the practice of game playing allows players to have such an experience adds to the intrinsic value of playing games.[4] My argument proceeds in two parts: first, I argue that the nature of games is such that anything that counts as a 'game' must provide its players with some minimal experience of freedom in playing the game. Second, I argue that, in practice, many games attract players by providing more robust experiences of freedom to their players as they play the game.[5]

3.1. Experiences of freedom

Before I begin my argument, I will briefly explain what I mean by 'experiences of freedom.' Sometimes I have a feeling that the future of my life is open, rather than closed, that the possible paths into the future that stretch out before me are uncountable, and that I could do or become anything. I feel free. This experience of freedom is part of a family of cognate experiences, feelings, moods, and attitudes, which encompasses the sense that my life is open before me, the attitude that I hold when I regard an activity as 'free time' or 'leisure' rather than

work, a feeling of refuge that I might find in privacy, a feeling of relief at not having to do things that I want to avoid, the sense of a beginning when I set out on an adventure, the excitement of discovery, a mood of spontaneity, and the attitude that I have toward my art when I creatively make aesthetic objects.

At the center of this family of feelings and related cognitive states is the experience of freedom that one can have about the future of one's own life not being fixed or determined. The sort of freedom that I am concerned with here differs from the sort of freedom that is a prerequisite for moral responsibility: it is the freedom of one's actions and ideas arising out of oneself without being fully determined by the external world or by one's own preexisting commitments and beliefs. This experience is often (but not always) associated with the free play of one's decision-making powers, when one can 'pick' what to do rather than choosing in a manner that is determined by prudential or moral reasons (cf. Ullmann-Margalit and Morganbesser 1977). I take it as a premise that the experience of freedom is valuable, in that it provides an independent source of intrinsic value.[6]

While I focus on *experiences* of freedom in the following discussion, I do not mean to confine my discussion to suggest that games do not *actually* provide their players with a form of freedom when they play. Indeed, when I write about 'experience of freedom,' I am concerned with *veridical* experiences: experiences that players have *because there is some respect in which they are free* rather than illusory experiences. The reason I focus on *experiences* of freedom rather than freedom itself is because I aim to describe a feature of games that players actively value and take pleasure in. Thus, I am interested in the freedom of games that forms part of players' conscious experience of playing them, rather than in any sort freedom that game players might have without being aware of it.

3.2. Freedom and the concept of a game

Games provide their players with the experience of freedom in two respects. First, as paradigmatically voluntary and unnecessary activities, games provide their players with the experience of undertaking a purely optional activity. As noted above, Suits defines a game as the 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 1990, 41). There is one sense in which playing a game is always something done for a further reason: to spend time to with friends, to solve a puzzle, to provoke conversation, to stave off boredom, and so forth. But there is another sense in which players accept the rules of a game for the sole purpose of making the game possible. The activities that a player performs *within* a game's 'magic circle' – the lusory space that players enter into when they play a game – are subject to constraints in the form of rules that are adhered to just to make the game possible (Huizinga 1950, 10). I might play a game of go in order to spend time with a friend and exercise my spatial reasoning skills. As we play, when I place a stone, I do so in pursuit of the end of accumulating points by

capturing my opponent's stones and securing space that my opponent cannot productively invade, which is the end that I adopt to make playing the game possible. I do not independently care about the arrangement of stones on a go board; I care only because I have taken up the pre-lusory aim of securing space on the go board in order to make playing the game possible. (In other words, for me to win, I must secure more space than my opponent does.) If I am really playing the game, then I will not deviate from the rules of go, even if I think that doing so might better achieve out-of-game values that I care about (Suits 1990, 145). Where I place my stones is not determined by what best allows me to exercise my spatial reasoning skills; rather, it is determined by the rules of go and my aim of winning the game.[7]

In the pure sense of game-playing that concerns Hurka and Suits, *playing* games is necessarily experienced by players as non-obligatory: 'Game-playing must have some external goal one aims at, but the specific features of this goal are irrelevant to the activity's value, which is entirely one of process rather than product, journey rather than destination' (Hurka 2006, 229). This view is also taken by philosophers who reject attempts to precisely define games and adopt more bottom-up approaches to classifying activities as games.[8] As Roger Caillois, a proponent of a pluralistic approach to characterizing games, notes, if playing were obligatory, 'it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion' (Caillois 2001, 9). Thus, if I am engaged in an activity that is recognizable as 'playing a game,' I am engaged in an activity that I do not *have* to do, and that I regard as such (and professional gamers are not 'playing a game' in this strict sense unless they are playing, at least in part, 'just for fun'). In this respect, an experience of freedom arising from the free play of my decision-making powers is characteristically provoked by the playing of any activity recognizable as a game.

Games are not the only activities that provide the experience of undertaking a purely optional activity. Play more generally provides an experience of activity that is intrinsically and non-instrumentally valued and that is fully voluntary (Tasioulas 2006, 244), as do activities of aesthetic appreciation and creation. Games are a distinctive form of play in that they are undertaken for non-instrumental reasons but also incorporate instrumental activity: players make 'moves' like placing a go stone for the instrumental reason that those moves contribute to the end of winning. This distinctive form of play is also distinctively valuable. In our everyday lives, when we exercise our decision-making powers in the context of instrumental activity, it is only rarely that we experience the completion of activity initiated by our decision-making powers because the valuable instrumental ends that we pursue take so long to achieve and are so complicated that it is very hard for us to know when or if we have achieved them. (Consider the activity of 'saving Venice's canals.' Have the canals been 'saved'? How could we know? The scope of potential risks to the canals is mind boggling.)

In games, we have the opportunity to see our decisions through to the end of the game, achieving or failing to achieve the lusory goal (winning) and the pre-lusory goal (the state of affairs that counts as winning, like putting my opponent into checkmate in chess) that we set out to achieve not because of their value but just to make the game possible. Games thus provide a distinctive experience of the free exercise of our decision-making powers in instrumental activity that is not provided by life outside of the magic circle: they provide an opportunity to frame our use of practical reason with the attitudes and dispositions characteristic of play. If the category of 'games' is co-extensive with the category of play-activity that has an instrumental structure, as Suits believes (Suits 1990, 90), then games also provide a distinctive experience of the free exercise of our decision-making powers in instrumental activity that other forms of play do not provide.[9]

3.3. Freedom and the experience of playing games

In addition to the experience of freedom *of playing* that games provide, many successful games provide their players with an experience of freedom *in playing*. When playing games, I do not invariably experience the actions that I take as part of a game to be unconstrained nor do I experience the possible paths that the game will follow as undetermined. For instance, if I know enough and am good enough at checkers, I might play a game of checkers and feel that every move I make in the game is determined by transparent considerations about which move is optimal, given the objective of winning.[10] I play the game voluntarily and regard my playing of checkers as non-instrumental, but, provided that I am committed to trying to win the game, the possibility space for my in-game decisions is narrowly circumscribed: I must make the single move that seems most likely to result in winning the game. Likewise, 'grinding' in computer games, where I repeat the same tasks over and over to advance characters or access new content, does not, in itself, provide me with an experience of freedom (although in the space of a game, it might serve an instrumental purpose of making an experience of openness possible once the grinding is complete and my character has 'leveled up').

However, in many or most successful games, I also have an experience of freedom as I make decisions *within* the game. For instance, when I play *Pictionary*, I have an experience of freedom in deciding how to illustrate words that I want my teammates to guess, because there are many different approaches that I might take to drawing these words and phrases. And if I know how to play checkers but my knowledge of checkers falls far short of understanding its solution, I might also have this experience, because multiple moves or strategies appear 'eligible' given my objective of winning. (Although whether I have an experience of freedom when I play checkers with imperfect knowledge rather than some cognate experience, like indecision, may depend on other features

of my psychology and the context in which I'm playing the game. Am I 'fooling around' or am I desperately trying to win, frustrated by my inability to discern the optimal move?[11]) Thus, the sense of freedom that I am interested in can arise from epistemic difficulties: my ignorance of the solution to checkers makes it possible for me to experience my decisions about how to move my pieces as relatively unconstrained by instrumental rationality.

Games exploit a variety of formal techniques that provide their players with such experiences. These techniques include structuring the play of the game to provide an openness of the development of narratives, an openness of strategy or decision-making, and an openness of the objective of the game itself. I will address each of these techniques in turn.

First, narrative-rich games, in which much of the experience of playing the game consists in assembling a story from plot elements provided by the game, often provide their players with an experience of freedom about the direction in which the narrative will develop. For instance, games featuring 'emergent narratives' in which a player 'imagines or "authors" the story by playing in a world she actively constructs,' like *Sim City* and *Civilization*, provide their players the opportunity to shape the storyline of the game in a variety of directions at the player's own discretion (Brand and Knight 2005, 4). Other games, including massively multiplayer online role-playing games ('MMORPGs'), provide their players with the opportunity to shape the stories within the game that they participate in by enabling them to control their self-presentation through avatars and characters. Many MMORPGs provide their players with the ability to interact with other players anonymously or pseudonymously, which enables players to present and explore identities (relatively) un-tied to their real-life identities. While such exploration can be misogynistic and racist (Rohwer 2014), some participants experience the opportunity for make-believe as freeing them from out-of-game identities that they wish to escape or that they wish felt less constricting. For instance, sociologists contend that anonymity and pseudonymity in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* enable some players to explore non-normative sexuality through erotic role-play by contributing to the insulation of the game from 'real life' (Brown 2015, 67). Games need not provide anonymity or pseudonymity for such experiences to arise. As Shannon Mussett has argued, the opportunity for imaginatively shaping an identity and a narrative in role playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* 'can allow for players to explore the intricacies of gender and sexuality in creative and potentially radical ways' (Mussett 2014, 189). Narrative openness provided through emergently structured narratives and self-presentation allows games to provide some of their players with an experience of freedom about the stories that they participate in and create while playing.

Second, games of sufficient complexity often provide their players with an experience of the openness of strategy or freedom of in-game decision-making. Many successful games provide their players with multiple, equally eligible

routes to winning. For instance, 'deck building' games in which players construct decks out of a large number of cards that perform different functions, like *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering*, provide players with many different ways to put together a deck, each of which is (roughly) equally compatible with the goal of winning the game. Similarly, games like chess and go provide a wide variety of competitive openings that players can decide between; deciding which sort of opening to use in a game of chess will often be driven by considerations about which strategy is most likely to result in winning the game, but because there are often multiple openings that appear about equally competitive to the player, this decision might also reflect considerations about style, or which opening is more fun. (As with decisions in checkers, whether the opportunity that these games provide actually eventuates in an experience of freedom depends on the abilities of their players, how much the players know, and the context in which they are playing the game.) Other games provide additional strategic decisions embedded in the game that players can make in a variety of ways each of which or many of which ways are compatible with winning the game. The open texture of play in a game provides players with an experience of freedom about their own decisions and about the states of affairs that will obtain in the game until it concludes.

Third, some games provide their players with an experience of openness about the objective (or the 'prelusory goal') of the game itself.[12] For instance, 'sandbox' games – games that provide players with the ability to move freely through virtual worlds, like *Minecraft* – might be played by different players with different objectives and different understandings of what it would mean to 'win' the game. In playing such a game, one can have an experience of freedom, or of the possibility of deep or ironic reflection, about the activity they are engaged in. A player might determine that they are, or should be, engaging in a fundamentally different activity from the one they were engaged in when they started playing the game. A game's openness about the goal of playing can provide players with a experience of freedom that is broader in scope than the experience of freedom about strategic choices because it enables players to freely pick which of a number of strategies they will pursue, given the aim of winning the game by bringing about a particular state of affairs, but also to freely pick what states of affairs they will attempt to bring about in playing the game.

The formal techniques that games exploit demonstrate that many, but not all, successful games provide the experience of freedom to their players as they play them. Some players seek out this experience when they decide what game to play, though for other players this experience may simply be a side effect of entering into the lusory space of a game. (Other players might play games *in spite of* this experience if, for instance, they want an activity to occupy their time but wish that they did not have to make any discretionary decisions.)

I understand the experience of freedom provoked by successful games as a narrower version of the attitude that artists have toward creative artworks of

genius. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant argues that 'one cannot learn to write inspired poetry, however exhaustive all the rules for the art of poetry and however excellent the models for it may be' because 'no Homer or Wieland can indicate how his ideas, which are fantastic and yet at the same time rich in thought, arise and come together in his head, because he himself does not know it and thus cannot teach it to anyone else either' (Kant 2000, 5:309). When artists cannot fully explain why they constructed their poems or sculptures as they did, this reflects their tendency to regard their art-making decisions as not exhausted by their own determinate concepts but as also reflecting an engagement with their own ideals or their own immediate experience of the world in a manner that cannot fully be captured in their existing conceptual repertoires. Feeling that there is some part of me that is ineffable, that I cannot know until it comes to the surface, so that even I might be surprised by who I am and what I will do, is part of the experience of freedom associated with truly creative artworks. Similarly, games that provide for the experience of freedom in playing provide the opportunity to play in a manner that cannot be fully explained by the rules of instrumental rationality about how best to win.

While games often provide their players with an experience of freedom, they do so through the strategic use of constraints in the form of rules. Constraints in the form of rules that players follow in order to play a game provide the scaffolding for the more complex experiences of freedom that their players can have. I agree with Hurka that part of the value of games is the complexity that they lend to otherwise simpler activities. If I sit down in front of a go board with a pile of stones and no rules to follow, there might be some sense that whatever activity I undertake is more 'free' than the activity of playing go, constrained by the game's rules. But while it is conceivable that I might do something complex and interesting with them, more likely than not I will just idly arrange the stones, ending up engaging in a much less complex and interesting activity than I could with the scaffolding of the game's rules. Because both insufficient and excessive complexity can undermine players' ability to be interested in a game, rules seek to calibrate the complexity of a game so that the players neither master the activity with tremendous ease nor find the activity so bafflingly difficult that they are unable to make any headway. The experience of freedom that games provide is a valuable experience of freedom *within a structure*, where the free play of one's decision-making powers is constrained by rules that make the activity more complex and therefore more intrinsically valuable. Such rules make game-playing and the accompanying experience of freedom possible while at the same time narrowing the possible scope of this experience.

3.4. Style: an objection

It may be objected that what is valuable about games, beyond their complexity and difficulty, is not that they provide an *experience* of freedom but rather that

when playing them their players actually *are* free.[13] Perhaps what is valuable about the openness provided by games is not the psychological experience of feeling that one's decisions are not narrowly constrained when one plays, but the other goods that players can achieve when they are able to make unconstrained decisions. When players are actually free, they are able to play with *individual style*, where their style is an expression of their ideals for how the game should best be played (Riggle 2015, 728).[14] For instance, a player might seek to play a game in a way that expresses their ideal of playing elegantly, aggressively, obtusely, or zanily. In playing with style, players have no occurrent sensation of freedom, because they are guided by and aim at expressing their ideals. The objection continues, it is this possibility of playing with style, in a way that uniquely reflects the player's individual ideals, that really makes it valuable to play games, rather than the bare experience of freedom.

My response to this objection comes in two parts. First, I accept that, in addition to the sensation of freedom that games often make available to their players, the fact of the freedom that games provide and those further goods that players are able to accomplish in virtue of having such freedom are also valuable. The further value of the freedom that games provide to their players does not diminish the value of the experience of freedom that the games that I have described provide to their players.

Second, the experience of freedom that I have described does not need to be explicitly and consciously conceptualized as one of freedom by players who experience it. The experience of freedom involves occurrent psychological states, which sometimes take the form of an explicit feeling that one is free to act as one picks but which can also take the form of a feeling that *I* and my discretionary powers can make a difference to how things will turn out or an awareness that how things will go is not determined in advance by rules, my instrumental rationality, or external forces. In this broad sense, experiences of freedom are compatible with feeling that in playing I am expressing my ludic ideals of how a game should be played, provided that I take myself to have discretion in determining how to act out my ideals. When the experience of freedom is understood in this way, this experience is a prerequisite for the expression of style in playing a game. It is only by having this experience, including some occurrent awareness of the openness of one's circumstances in a game, that a player can uniquely express their ideals through play, for it is only when one is aware that it is possible to do so that it makes sense to shape the circumstances in which one finds oneself to express one's ideals for oneself, as a person or as a game player. The good of 'playing with style' is not an end that the experience of freedom aims at and achieves, but a good that is made possible by experiences of freedom in games that contributes to the intrinsic value of such experiences.[15]

We should think of the value of playing with style not as a rival to the value of the experiencing freedom in playing, but as a correlative: games whose rules shut out the everyday world of human action and practical rationality both

provide players with the distinctive sort of freedom that allows for exercises of style and allow players to experience themselves as free.[16] Whether the experience of freedom that players have is about the shape of the narrative that they create through the game, the strategic decisions that they make while playing, or the objective of the game, the freedom that games provide in playing gives players the experience that how they play will reflects something unique about them as individuals. Some games, like tic-tac-toe and snakes and ladders do not afford any discretionary control to players, and even some games that do provide discretion to players might not allow much room for individual flair. When I play chess, for instance, I see most of the moves that I should make as determined by the situation that I am in, rather than by my own sensibility. The parallel between freedom and style thus elucidates the difference between the experience of freedom and the cognate experience of discovery. Sometimes I do not antecedently know what move to make, but once I settle on the right move it seems to arise inevitably from my circumstances. Making such discoveries may require creativity but it does not allow for the discretionary expression of my ludic ideals because the move I make is fully dictated by features of my situation. Games that do not allow for the manifestation of style in their play do not provide players with the core experience of freedom about how things will go in the game. How best to play to win might be encapsulated in a game's constitutive rules, but how to play with style cannot be.

4. Complexity versus freedom

I have argued that all games provide their players with an experience of freedom that derives from participating in a paradigmatically optional activity that one need not undertake, that many games provide their players with the experience of freedom as they play the game, and that players often value this experience.[17] It remains to be seen whether this conflicts with the difficulty view of the value of games. In this section, I argue that appreciating this form of success for games requires modifying Hurka's view. While I share John Tasioulas's worry that the difficulty view's focus on admiration and achievement risks 'the invasion of play by the rhetoric of achievement' (Tasioulas 2006, 251, quoting Christopher Lasch), I accept Hurka's view that the value of games is a value of 'process rather than product, journey rather than destination' (Hurka 2006, 229). I disagree, however, that this value must come from the *structure* of game-activity, as Hurka proposes. The intrinsic value of the 'process' can also come from the *mode* in which the activity of game-playing is pursued, and *playing games in such a manner as to provide an experience of freedom* is a source of intrinsic value. This source of intrinsic value is not an end aimed at and achieved, like saving Venice's canals or overthrowing a tyrant; it also is not a feature of the organization of sub-activities into more complicated and difficult activities. Games can have intrinsic value by conducing to the experience of engaging in activities *in such a manner as to*

generate an experience of freedom without having this as their aim, and so games are valuable in a different dimension than difficulty or complexity.

Hurka's view conflicts with the view that I have developed here when Hurka contends that 'game playing … cannot have the additional intrinsic value that derives from instrumental values' (Hurka 2006, 233). As explained above, for Hurka, games cannot be more valuable than equally complex non-game activities because the nature of games is that they do not aim at any valuable instrumental ends (which, at least when they are achieved, add to an activity's intrinsic value). For Hurka, the difference between games and non-game activities is that games cannot aim at any external good (because if they did, they would not be undertaken simply for their intrinsic value) and so cannot have as a source of value the aiming at and achievement of valuable ends that contribute to the (intrinsic) value of instrumental, non-game activities. This excludes the possibility that part of the value of games lies in the experience of freedom that they provide to their players. By its nature, playing games does not aim directly at producing this experience. However, while players cannot directly *aim* at this experience, a consequence of playing games is that players (at least often) have an experience of freedom. I have argued that one source of games' intrinsic value is the effect that they have on their players' experiences even when they are not undertaken with the immediate aim of generating this effect. Indeed, they generate this effect in part because they are undertaken without *any* immediate instrumental aim. I therefore disagree with Hurka's view that an activity can have intrinsic value *either* because it aims at and achieves good consequences *or* because of its internal structure; I contend that an activity can also be valuable in virtue of the psychological experiences that it generates in its participants without aiming to do so. Games produce such experiences precisely by *not* aiming at some further value.[18]

Thus, less complex games can, in one important respect, be more valuable than more difficult or complex games. Consider the role-playing game *The Quiet Year*. In this game, players define the struggles of a post-apocalyptic community by drawing a map and telling stories about it; the action of the game lasts for a year, at the end of which 'the Frost Shepherds will come, ending the game,' with no further specification of who the Frost Shepherds are or what this rule means (Alder 2013).[19] Most people will, I think, intuitively regard *The Quiet Year* as significantly less difficult than chess, whether because there are fewer 'moves' to organize hierarchically to achieve the goal of winning or because it takes less effort to play. However, *The Quiet Year* provides an experience of freedom that chess does not because it makes use of all three of the formal techniques of promoting an experience of freedom that I have described: it enables players to assemble a narrative of their choosing from the plot elements of the game, it provides openness of strategy in formulating what the post-apocalyptic community will do, and it provides players an opportunity to decide for themselves what objective to pursue within the game. On my view, it is a game that is less

difficult than chess but that provides a greater experience of freedom than chess, and to that extent has more intrinsic value.

Some people, including Hurka might resist this claim, since successfully playing *The Quiet Year* requires assembling a complex narrative, and the complexity of the storytelling that it requires may be just as great as the complexity of chess.[20] If this view is correct, my discussion here shows not that *The Quiet Year* is less difficult than chess but good in a different dimension than difficulty but instead shows that *The Quiet Year*, while as difficult as chess, is also good in a different way. Games' non-instrumental framing of instrumental activity reliably gives rise to a pleasurable and valuable experience of freedom. Games are valuable, in part, because of the framing that players engage in while playing them. A game need not be maximally difficult in order to generate a maximally free experience of playing.

Hurka might also reply that he recognizes that playing games 'can still contain … the distinctively modern good of achieving a goal regardless of its value' (Hurka 2006, 234). However, the 'distinctively modern' value of game playing has to do not only with achieving a good 'regardless of its value' but also with undertaking an activity simply because one has settled on doing so, e.g. playing a games 'for the fun of it.' Having fun is not the same as just undertaking intrinsically valuable activity – it is undertaking *unnecessary* intrinsically valuable activity. In everyday life, as we instrumentally pursue ends that we value we must attend to the many effects, intended and unintended of our decisions. Our ability to exercise our practical reason is often constrained by the high stakes that attach to our decisions – the risks of harming other people or treating them immorally. 'The pressure to do things that really matter, with all the attendant difficulty, risk of failure, and uncertainty involved, can be burdensome' (Scheffler 2013, 57). Will trying to save Venice's canals have unintended effects on housing prices? Will it distract from other, more valuable projects?

In playing a game, we can focus on the distinctive pleasure of unconstrainedly exercising our power to decide what to do, because the downstream effects of our decisions terminate at the edge of the magic circle, at least as long as players do not exhibit the failure characteristic of being a 'bad sport,' where players do things as part of a game that have effects that cannot be effectively cabined in the space of the game. Games provide an opportunity to exercise our practical powers in a low-stakes environment with relative impunity to their global consequences, freeing us from the anxiety that our decisions will 'mess things up' in a big way. Games can be fun and valuable because they provide an experience of purely optional activity, where we always get to exercise our power to set up ends for ourselves when we are not required (even by our own lights) to set up those ends.[21]

5. Games and politics

The advantages that arise from the sort of freedom afforded by playing games extend beyond the immediate experience of that freedom. Games can provide a limited model of what experiencing the future of one's life as open, rather than closed, is like more generally. In lives where possibilities are closed off, games can model the experience of a freer sense of life. (Their ability to do so depends on who is playing the game and the context in which they play.) Is playing a good game merely a relief from work or tedium or is it something more intrinsically valuable than that? Samuel Scheffler argues that some people take pleasure in playing games because 'it can come as a relief to pretend that things matter when they don't' (Scheffler 2013, 57). But in the best moments playing a game can do more than this, reminding its players of how open life can be, even in the ethically imperfect world that they inhabit.

Furthermore, the experience that games provide of arbitrarily exercising one's decision-making powers may serve useful ethical purposes. The experience of freedom in games is close to the experience of choice that liberalism makes available to consumers. In Michel Foucault's view, the principal variety of 'freedom' provided by European governments to their citizens beginning in the eighteenth century is the freedom to make decisions as individuals that are not prescribed or dictated by governmental regulations but that, at the level of a population produce predictable and manageable results (Foucault 2008, 59–61). The freedom of liberal capitalism 'is much more the spontaneity, the internal and intrinsic mechanisms of economic processes than a juridical freedom of the individual recognized as such' (Foucault 2008, 61). Both games and liberal capitalism provide an opportunity to experience the free play of one's decision-making powers, whether or not that experience corresponds to any meaningful sense in which the future of one's life is actually open. Thus, Foucault describes the economic capitalism sanctioned by liberalism as 'the game of freedom and security' (Foucault 2008, 65). As I argue elsewhere, if laws or regulations are designed to provide such an experience, we might worry that those laws 'mask' their own political effects, forestalling political efforts to change them (Gingerich 2016, 102). Games, in contrast provide a site where players can experience the pleasure of freedom where it does not matter whether this experience is 'real.' In games, this experience is provided by rules that players voluntarily adopt for non-instrumental reasons, rather than by laws that are coercively imposed. By providing a context in which what matters is artificial, games allow for the experience of freedom connected to instrumental activity without allowing the pleasure of this experience to interfere in our engagement with politics.

6. Conclusion

Hurka locates the value of games in their complexity: for him games are less valuable than equivalently complex non-game activities that aim at and achieve instrumentally valuable ends. I have argued that games paradigmatically provide access to the good of the experience of freedom for their players, and that while games do not aim at this good, it is still part of the intrinsic value of the activity of game playing, and so that Hurka's account of the source of games' value must be modified. Following optional rules for non-instrumental reasons provides a distinctive experience of discretionary action free from the constraints of reasons and duties. Games are valuable in part because they provide an opportunity for the free play of our decision-making powers.

Notes

1. Not everyone accepts this view of professionals. For an argument that professional players should have a place in Suits's utopia, see Kolers (2016). Bradford does not directly address the question of professional players but appears to agree with Hurka (Bradford 2015, 184).
2. Bradford provides a fuller account of why difficult activities are valuable: engaging in difficult activity (for her, activity that requires intense effort) is an exercise of the will, and exercising the 'will to power' to overcome resistance or obstacles is a perfectionist capacity, which is intrinsically valuable (Bradford 2015, 120–121).
3. Bradford's view is similar, although she is less concerned to compare games to non-game activities than is Hurka. For Bradford: (1) games are valuable because they transform less difficult activities (that require less intense effort) into more difficult activities (that require more intense effort), (2) more difficult games (that require more intense effort) are better than less difficult games (that require less intense effort), and (3) games gain further value because they pursue an intrinsic good (of effort) for its own sake (Bradford 2015, 182–184).
4. My view here accords with C. Thi Nguyen's view that playing a game involves entering a special motivational state that is distinct from the ends of playing a game (Nguyen 2017a, 136), as well as with Bradford's view that achievement sometimes requires not aiming directly at the ultimate end of an activity (Bradford 2015, 193 n. 17).
5. John Tasioulas develops a related argument against Hurka, arguing that that primary intrinsic good of games does not have to do with achievement but instead with *play*, which is a basic good, like friendship, enjoyment, and knowledge (Tasioulas 2006, 243). For Tasioulas play is free activity that is separated from ordinary life, ordered by rules and expectations, valued for its own sake, enjoyable, and socially acknowledged as valuable (Tasioulas 2006, 244–247). My account diverges from Tasioulas's in two respects. First, Tasioulas criticizes Hurka's view by rejecting his definition of games (Tasioulas 2006, 237). Unlike Tasioulas, I contend that even if we accept Hurka's definition, his account of games' value is problematically incomplete. Second, Tasioulas's account is designed to show how 'a large number of everyday instances of game playing' of games that are not remotely complex or difficult, like bingo and snakes and ladders, might have significant intrinsic value (Tasioulas 2006, 248). My account is designed to provide an adequate foundation for answering evaluative questions about particular

games – which games are more valuable and which less so – and does not aim to describe most everyday instances of game playing as valuable. Some games provide greater freedom than other games and, for that reason, are more valuable as games. In my view, games like bingo and snakes and ladders provide – at least for adult players – no or almost no experience of freedom.

6. Whether experiencing the sort of freedom that I have described here is in fact an independent source of value is a complex question that I explore elsewhere (Gingerich 2018). My reliance on this premise here is reasonable because, as the discussion that follows in this section demonstrates, designers and players of games regard the experience of freedom as valuable, both for the particular pleasure that it can occasion and as a source of fun and excitement. I address in section 3.4 the objection that what is valuable about games is simply the freedom that that they provide to their players and the other goods that having such freedom makes possible rather than the *experience* of freedom itself.

7. I discuss below those games that provide more 'space' to their players to make decisions that are not fully determined by the set of the game's rules and the player's objective of winning. Thanks to a member of the Editorial Board for helping me to clarify my description of go.

8. For this reason, while I accept Suits's definition of games for the purpose of my argument, I do not think that my argument's success depends on accepting his definition.

9. For a perspicacious account of how the distinctive pleasure of games is associated with the opportunity to engage in practical reasoning for its own sake rather than for any instrumental end, see Nguyen (2017c).

10. Checkers is 'solved,' in that perfect play by both players leads to a draw (Schaeffer et al. 2007).

11. Thanks to Calvin G. Normore and Stephanie Patridge for raising this point.

12. Other games provide a different, more minimal, experience of freedom by promoting uncertainty about their *outcomes*. Virtually all games that it makes sense to play 'for fun' provide either an experience of openness about their objectives or an experience of uncertainty about their lusory outcomes. Typically, I am uninterested in playing games in which I know to a certainty that I will win or lose before I begin playing. I might play a game that I know I will lose to help learn the rules, to teach someone else how to play, or to learn how to play better, but more typically, I want to have *a chance* of winning. At the very least, it is important that I not know in advance *exactly* how I will lose.

13. Thanks to C. Thi Nguyen for pushing me to address this objection.

14. Nick Riggle's account of style as an expression of one's ideals is constructed as a theory of 'personal style' – a way of living a life that expresses one's ideals about how to live – that Riggle then extends to 'artistic style' – a way of creating art that expresses one's ideals for artistic creation (Riggle 2015, 729). I here extend Riggle's notion of personal style to 'ludic style' – a way of playing a game that expresses one's ideals for game-play.

15. Those who reject Riggle's view that style involves the expression of one's ideals and think that style is the potentially involuntary reflection of one's personality, traits of mind, and character (Robinson 1985, 229), or who think that one's ludic ideals can be expressed without the exercise of any discretion, will be unmoved by the second part of my reply to the objection. But the first part of my reply still stands.

16. This claim is a general one: I do not mean to deny that there are some games that provide players with a 'phony' experience of freedom that does not correspond

to *really* being free and some games that provide players with an opportunity to play with style without providing any subjective experience of freedom. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me to formulate the connection between 'actual' freedom and 'experiences' of freedom.

17. As noted at the outset of § 3, this claim is confined to the narrow sense of game-play adopted by Hurka and by Suits in his description of utopia. Many professional games with substantial real-life consequences provide their players with, at most, a very limited experience of freedom. (Insofar as professional games qualify as real Suitsian games, however, they will provide their players with some limited experience of the freedom *of playing* described in § 3.2.).

18. Bradford thinks that 'it's not the needlessness that's doing any of the work in making' games into valuable activities (Bradford 2015, 96). For this reason, her view of the value of games should also be amended, for, as I have argued, the needlessness of games is, indeed, part of what makes them valuable activities. However, unlike Hurka, Bradford acknowledges that the value of achievements can be enhanced by factors that are not essential to achievements, including by goods that activities achieve without directly aiming at them (Bradford 2015, 133, 193 n. 17). She also acknowledges that there may be other perfectionist capacities beyond those that she focuses on – will, rationality, and physical capacity (Bradford 2015, 149). Thus, while Bradford's version of the difficulty view is vulnerable to the same criticisms as Hurka's version, Bradford's version can be amended more easily to accommodate the value of the experience of freedom. Particularly, I think that Bradford could and should recognize spontaneous freedom as a perfectionist capacity, because it is characteristic of humans and worth developing, but I leave aside my argument for this claim for another time.

19. Thanks to C. Thi Nguyen for introducing me to this game.

20. Bradford persuasively argues that Hurka's view that difficulty arises from complexity should be rejected because there are many complex but non-difficult activities – particularly, communication – which are extremely complicated but do not require intense effort (Bradford 2015, 34). Bradford's account thus provides a better explanation of why *The Quiet Year* is less difficult than chess. (Because Bradford's account of intense effort is agent-relative, we would need to know more about who is playing to conclude that one or the other of the games is more difficult. For a player with extreme social anxiety, *The Quiet Year* might take much more intense effort than chess.).

21. Thanks to Seana Shiffrin for raising this point.

Acknowledgements

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