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CQ REVIEW

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The main goal of the Book Review Section of Cambridge Quarterly is to cultivate a place where scholars can share their thoughts on broad philosophical topics sparked by noteworthy books. Instead of focusing narrowly on works in healthcare ethics, our reviews cast a wider net so that we may reflect on diverse ideas. Please email dien.ho@mcphs.edu, if you have book recommendations or if you are interested in writing a review.

Games: Agency as Art, by Nguyen Thi, Oxford University Press, 2020.

When I was a kid, playing Double Dragon II with my best friend after school, it seemed like common knowledge that playing too many games was bad for your health. Too much screen time was—I think—supposed to lead to bad posture, poor eyesight, and a general disregard for personal hygiene. But now we are in the age of exercise games, like Wii Fit, and websites like DietBet, where you wager money on yourself to lose weight. You can wear an activity tracker on your wrist that will track and log things like your heart rate and calorie expenditure, and even meditation apps like Calm will keep track of streaks: how many days in a row you have practiced.

I do not doubt that turning health into a game can be good for some people, but it has always made me deeply uneasy, and so I was grateful to Nguyen's *Games: Agency as Art* for giving me some conceptual tools for understanding what makes me so uncomfortable about some of these practices. I love games, and I have spent a fair bit of my life in competitive sports, but the sports I have played have generally been ones with weight classes. And even though conventional wisdom is shifting on this, my younger years were definitely spent believing that the lighter I could be the better. We did not have FitBits when I was in college, but there were still websites and apps that would let you track your weight, food, and calorie expenditure. I tried using one as an experiment with a friend (a runner) during grad school, while I was a competitive taekwondo athlete, and it became obvious very quickly that the two of us were approaching the whole thing very differently. It took a few weeks before I realized that her goal was balance; she wanted her calorie intake to match, at least more or less, her calorie expenditure. Mine was anything but balanced. Every day was more of a struggle to widen the gap between calories in and calories out. It seemed that the two of us were not really playing the same game after all.

One of the important things that Nguyen's book gives us is a way to think about the relationship between games, agency, and what we value. In doing so it can help us understand the appeals and dangers of the gamification of ordinary life. However, it will first be helpful to get a sense of the overall account of the connection between games and agency. In Nguyen's view, games often involve taking up various disposable ends, like moving tokens around a board or getting a ball across a field. These ends are disposable, because we generally would not care about them outside of the game context. They matter only for the duration of the game that we are playing. I do not normally hoard playing cards when I am just living my life, but I might try to if I am playing a card game where accumulating cards is how you win. Disposable ends are conceptually important here, because they help us understand what Nguyen calls *striving play*. When we play a game, we might play it for a lot of different reasons. We might play just for the sake of winning, maybe because winning will make us money or give us some other kind of concrete gain. But we might also play just for the sake of playing that particular game—and in that kind of play, even though we are still trying to win, we are not trying to win for its own sake. Instead, for this to be

striving play, we are trying to win because it allows us to play the game. And, it is the *playing* of the game that we really care about. One way to make sense of the motivation behind striving play is to think about a kind of game we genuinely enjoy, and how play is often much more satisfying when our opponent is close to our own skill level. Winning against someone who is not very good might be nice, but it is just a different kind of experience when we are challenged. It is that kind of play for the sake of the struggle that is called striving play.

Related to these temporary ends, game players will also generally take up a temporary agency for the duration of gameplay. In the context of a game, one often behaves in ways that would be unacceptable in nongame interactions—perhaps deceiving one's friends and taking advantage of their weaknesses in order to score more points. But there are other, more positive, forms of agency as well. For instance, we might also get to build elaborate constructions, solve complex puzzles, or role play as someone with intriguingly different life circumstances. This, as Nguyen argues, is how we understand games in aesthetic terms: they are artworks whose medium is agency. And ultimately, one of the central benefits of games is the opportunity they give us to move between different kinds of agential modes.

But I am focusing here on what Nguyen's book can tell us about the ethical implications of games. The wide range of agencies that games allow us to explore can be important to our development as people, insofar as they allow us to cultivate different ways of being. But it is also important to remember that games are often social activities that we engage in with others in our lives. This means that, although our game agencies are to *some* extent temporary and separable from the rest of our experiences—taking place in what some have called a magic circle—there is often something permeable about this boundary. So, although the ends and agency we adopt in a game are temporary, we might still feel that extra bit of satisfaction if we win against someone who has been irritating us lately. Conversely, it is probably a bad thing if I get so caught up in my temporary game ends that I crush my 8-year old cousin's spirit, causing tears.

Although games are not completely separable from the rest of our social lives, there are still features of our in-game interactions that the rest of our lives typically do not possess. Even the most difficult games often have relatively straightforward goals. Admittedly, they do not have to—but Nguyen mostly sets aside the ones that do not, calling them "subtle value games." In nongame life, my goals are much trickier. For instance, I value being active and care about my overall bodily well-being. But that is actually a matter of valuing many different things, some of which are in tension with each other. Getting plenty of exercise is great, but so is getting adequate rest in order to prevent injuries. Indoor weight-bearing exercise is good for my joints, but going for a hike in the woods is good for my mental well-being and keeps my dogs happy. What gamification often does is flatten out those different values into a very small number of measurables.

In-game goals generally possess a great deal of *value clarity*: they are typically easy to articulate, apply, evaluate, and compare. Games might have a points system, where points are awarded for concrete achievements, like killing a particular type of enemy, obtaining a certain number of tokens, or moving an object from one place to another. The clarity of game values can be part of what makes them just so satisfying to play in a world in which values tend to be much murkier and more difficult to articulate. I value my family's happiness, but I do not always know what is going to maximize that. Do I finish my grading instead of spending extra time with them, knowing that piles of unfinished grading only make me more stressed out and difficult to live with? It is not easy to say what is going to give the most value here, at least not in the same way that I know a stealth kill in my video game is going to score me more points than a nonstealth kill.

It only gets more complicated when I think about the different values that I hold. Although in games, goals are easily commensurable, such things do not generally hold for nongame goals. For instance, in a game, I might have to choose between quests to complete. I can compare the rewards of one to the rewards of the other, since the two will generally be given in the same terms. But on a given day, I might have to weigh spending time on an overdue writing project against going to the gym, where I value my career, research, and the person to whom I owe an article, as well as my physical abilities. It is not clear in this case just how to compare the rewards of spending my time on each of these things, partly because the rewards are so different in character, but also because the values themselves are extremely difficult to

compare. Of course, it is fine that there are some areas in my life in which values are clear and straightforward, and others in which they are not—unless perhaps I try to "export" the value clarity of games into the rest of my life, and treat decisions about how to spend my time generally as a simple matter of weighing easily quantifiable outcomes. I just should not be trying to figure out how many life points I would score spending a relaxing evening watching TV with my partner, versus spending that evening studying abstract algebra.

Still, value clarity is appealing for many people. A lot of life is filled with difficult and messy decisions, and lacking in clarity. Maybe when you read the end of the previous paragraph, you thought it would have been nice if we could just tally up how many life points each decision would score? Or maybe you unconsciously tried to score each of those choices yourself, depending on how appealing you find television or math. There is a reason why gamification works on us, after all. Still, it is closely connected to a worrying phenomenon that Nguyen calls *value capture* which tends to include the following steps:

1) Our values are, at first, rich and subtle.
2) We encounter simplified (often quantified) versions of those values.
3) Those simplified versions take the place of our richer values in our reasoning and motivation.
4) Our lives get worse.

This takes us back to FitBits, calorie trackers, or otherwise gamified ways to measure our health or fitness. It can be easy, especially when you are an insecure young athlete who just wants to be good at your sport, to want to be able to associate your goodness or worth with a number, such as the gap between your calorie expenditure and intake. After all, that number is much more controllable than overall ability. If you want to know that you are at least doing *something* right, being able to count burning lots of calories as a kind of win sounds appealing.

This is also reminiscent of the kinds of measures that institutions like companies or universities use to measure productivity. Standardized test scores or university rankings are also sometimes used to stand in for quality in ways that might (but do not have to) be malicious. Such measures might initially be adopted for bureaucratic ease, but come to represent something much bigger, in which increasing a school or department's place in the rankings becomes an end in its own right. Getting out of the trap of value capture can be difficult in a lot of these cases. Sometimes it might be a matter of reorienting oneself with respect to our values. For instance, an admissions committee might look at standardized test scores, but acknowledge that those are at best measures of very specific kinds of skills, and consider what other qualities they might want in prospective candidates.

One possibility that striving play offers, though, is that we can take a step back. Remember that in striving play, we are trying to win for the sake of the struggle, not struggling just for the sake of winning. So, it makes sense to step back sometimes and ask ourselves if we are really having fun. We can ask whether the pursuit of this particular end is actually giving us the kind of satisfaction we wanted, and maybe reconsider if it is not. One problem with that kind of strategy, though, is that some of the simplified values that take the place of our richer ones also coincide with the pressures of certain ideologies, like patriarchy or capitalism. So, when it comes to things like tracking our weight, bank account, or citation numbers, we are not doing this in a value-neutral world, but rather one that tells us we should look a certain way, be sufficiently rich, and be successful under a relatively narrow range of research parameters. In other words, some of our values seem to already have been captured.

Nguyen does not give us a perfect solution for the problems of gamification and value capture, but that would be far too much to expect from just one person and just one book. He does, however, give us some great conceptual tools for being able to recognize the potential hazards of gamification when we see them and to see if there might be cases in which the stepping back associated with striving play might be helpful. For example, someone who finds that their meditation app is not in fact improving their mental health might try a different method or stop paying attention to their streaks. *Games* does leave open the interesting question of what *else* we might do to counteract the harms of value capture, particularly in some of the cases I mentioned above, in which the simplified values coincide neatly with other social pressures. I am hopeful that Nguyen's future work can give us more insight into these kinds of issues,

since gamification only seems to become increasingly prevalent in the world in which we live. Our lives can be deeply complex, entangled as we are with the lives of others within social structures whose inner workings can frequently be obscure. In the face of such complexity, simplified value systems, which might feel as though they can help to structure our decisions, can be incredibly appealing. I will close this review with one anecdote from my own experience.

It is probably unsurprising to the reader, after all that has been said, that it would not have worked for me to step back and wonder whether obsessing over my weight was improving my athletic experience (it was not). But external interventions were sometimes successful. One season, three of us were more or less the same size, and in a lot of intercollegiate competitions, you could only field one athlete in each weight division. My coach decided that I would be the one to actually move *up* a weight class, which threw my values for a loop. It is not as though that act completely dissolved my overidentification of goodness with weight, but it certainly disrupted it, at least for a while. Since for once, my being lighter just was not going to improve my chances at gold, I could focus on other, more productive things. So maybe even in cases where we are not in a good position to step back and assess the impact of our own oversimplified values, others might sometimes be properly placed to help us get reoriented again.

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