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Agential layering, the absurd and the grind in game-playing

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Introduction

This paper attempts to provide a reflection on Nguyen's (2020) book, *Games: Agency as Art*. It demonstrates how games provide new ontological spaces and ways of being by focusing on the concept of agential layering that Nguyen suggests is the mechanism by which we can take up, and shift between, different agential requirements and motivations in and out of game-playing. This paper begins with a considering of the uniqueness of game-playing as an art form in its ability to play, replay, and change the artifact as it is created. It then provides a deeper analysis of the concept of agential layering and what this mechanism might be before considering the way in which meaning and value affect and impact agential layers through the concept of 'grinding' in games.

The uniqueness of games as agential ontologies

Nguyen's (2020) core thesis is that games are an art form that utilizes the medium of agency. It differs in comparison to other art forms because it enables us (as players) to be directly involved in a way that is not afforded by literature, music, theatre or sculpture. To understand the uniqueness of games as an art form, it may be useful to think of three roles in the arts: creator, spectator and player. Most art forms emphasize the role of creator and spectator, whereas in games, it is the player that takes centre stage. Creators are those who are involved in the process from conception to product: the artist, writer, composer. Spectators are those who consume the finished product: the audience, reader, listener. But it is perhaps the role of the player that is most interesting because it holds the space between creator and spectator; it is the player's agency (and their voluntary adoption of an agential role) that is the artwork itself. As Nguyen correctly identifies, games play with agency, but in a way that is not offered by other art forms. Whilst an actor or musician may perform a character role or recite a composition, they are limited in the agential moves they can make. Actors are constrained in their agency when they are performing a play, despite the fact that there may be some scope for minor adaptations to the script. Games, however, open up the possibility of different agential moves for the player herself. As Nguyen notes, games shape the agential skeleton which the player will inhabit for the duration for the game; it is the player who puts the flesh on the bones. Perhaps the nearest other art form to games are improvised theatre or jazz where the medium enables a degree of flexibility and choice in agential action, but these seem to be qualitatively different to game-playing which is framed by rules, means and goals. In contrast, most art forms are for the passive spectator whose agency is limited to choosing to engage with the art or not. This is ultimately what makes game-playing fundamentally different to reading literature, attending a rock concert or watching a film.

An example to illustrate how games create new ontological spaces and possibilities of being can be drawn from a highly popular open world video game, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2). RDR2 was released by Rockstar in 2018 and has been rated as one of the richest, most sophisticated and most

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beautiful games ever created, with a score of 97% on the well-regarded Metacritic (2021) website. It is set at the end of the 19th century in mid-west America where a group of outlaws navigate the changing times, trying to hold on to their nomadic 'wild west' lifestyle whilst at the same time being confronted with increasing urban growth and industrialisation. At the heart of the game is a very powerful and compelling storyline but it is possible to play for many hours barely being involved in the storyline at all. Instead, players can wander the vast world discovering new locations and animal species, spend time drinking beer at campfires listening to stories and songs, playing poker, chopping wood, or a whole host of other activities. The first time I played the game, I focused my efforts on interacting with the main storyline where you inhabit the central character of Arthur Morgan, who, through your choices, is either a ruthless, heartless, murdering outlaw, or a lovable, generous, misunderstood rogue (the choices players make changes the plot to some degree). However, as the storyline developed and I was further engrossed in living the life of Morgan, my emotional attachment to the main character also grew. When Morgan (spoiler alert!) died towards the end of the game I felt I had made a mistake in rushing through the storyline so quickly. Arthur Morgan was a character I had inhabited and I felt genuine sadness and regret that my experience of living his life had come to an end. After Morgan dies, player agency is transferred to a different character, John, who is able to experience new events so the story continues, albeit without Arthur Morgan. But my experience of loss led me to end the game I was playing and restart from the beginning. However, this time, as I knew how the storyline was going to pan out I was determined to save Morgan from his fate. Since it is possible to play the game (indefinitely) by concentrating on other non-storyline activities, as long as I played the game in this way, everything with my character would be ok; I could stop him getting tuberculosis and dying a tragic death and I could stop other loved characters being killed too. I knew the path of fate for each of them but this time I could prevent it.

What this example highlights is one of the paradoxes of the striving play that Nguyen notes. The experience of playing RDR2 is clearly very different to reading a novel or watching a film where there is nothing that can be done to stop the story being told except give up reading or watching altogether. As a spectator, you have no agency in the art itself; the story as it has been written must be told. Yet, a game allows us to change or extend the story, or replay with a completely new strategy. We are left with a paradoxical situation whereby we are striving towards a goal whilst part of us hopes never to reach it. In this sense the best games would seem to be those that are continually engaging and motivating for us to play indefinitely.

Yet even for the striving player, there will come a point at which our striving no longer seems worth it. Consider, for example, the case of the greatest tennis rally ever witnessed: two players are having to utilize all their skill and ability to keep the ball in play and win the point. They are both genuinely trying to hit the winning stroke but are perfectly matched opponents so that the rally continues. At first, both players and spectators are enthralled; each time it looks like a winning shot is hit, the opponent just about manages to get in position to return it. In theory, this may seem like the ideal game. In reality, it is anything but. Eventually, perhaps sooner than we may think, the spectators' concentration wanes and they start to think about other things. The players too are exhausted and are longing for the point to end. They may start to think about giving up as they have other things that they want to do. An interminable game, whilst perfect in theory, quickly becomes boring. And this is where Nguyen's concept of agential layering is relevant.

The concept of agential layering

The rules of games set the parameters of action whereas the goal designates the final destination. But, in accordance with Suits' definition of game-playing, there are obstacles designed to make our task more difficult than it otherwise needs to be. To play a game is 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' in pursuit of a goal (Suits 2014, 43). Moreover, such a goal is only worth pursuing because it is constitutive of the game itself. To be involved in a game is to take up the agential limits provided by the game; it is to be constrained in your actions in a way that you would not choose if your motivation was purely attaining the end point itself. To return to Suits' (2014)

familiar example: the aim of golf is to get the ball in a cup. If my motivation was focused purely on this goal, then my agency would be limited by the laws of physics, my corporeal nature and any technological advancements I happen to have to hand. In other words, I would act in whatever way I believed would be the most efficient in attaining this goal. The most efficient option may be for me to run over to the cup with the ball in hand and drop it in; or I may be party to a new piece of technology whereby I can stick a small implement to the ball and it would fly out of my hand and into the cup as if magnetically attracted; or I may have received a neural implant which means that I can control objects easily through the power of thought alone and therefore simply will the ball to the cup. So, whilst there will always be limits to my agential choices in how I attain the goal of getting the ball into a cup, efficiency itself is the driver. In games, it is the opposite. When I am not game-playing my agency is constrained by factors outside my control. In game-playing by contrast, I choose to constrain my agency by voluntarily limiting the means I can use to reach my goal. I place self-imposed constraints on my agency as if I had no choice in doing so; I act as if I am motivated to reach the goal and yet deceive myself into thinking that the means I am using to get there are the only means possible. If achieving the goal were all that mattered, we would not accept unnecessary and inefficient means that games require.

This then raises the question about agential motivation, and indeed, the notion of agential layering that Nguyen brings into his work. In particular, how it is possible to be fully engaged in an activity that we know is deliberately and necessarily inefficient. In this, game-players are able to occupy multiple layers of agency, each of which provides different meaning and value to the activity one is involved in. As Nguyen notes:

The inner agent tries to win. The outer agent has no reason to help the inner agent, and may manipulate their overall ability to win, in order to get the right degree of struggle. We have, then, the capacity to submerge ourselves in a temporary agency, and thereby create layers of motivational states. In striving play, the inner layer involves taking on motivations to succeed in the game's terms – to win, and to win by achieving whatever the game specifies as the goals. The outer layer involves those motivations which brought us to play the game in the first place – an interest in aesthetics, fun, fitness, or whatever. These motivations of the inner layer are justified by the motivations of the outer layer, but that justification isn't phenomenally active during the game. We do not hold both layers in the forefront of our consciousness. We hide our larger reasons from ourselves for a time, submerging ourselves in the inner layer. (Nguyen 2020, 56)

For Nguyen, we are able to submerge ourselves into alternative agencies but at the same time shift between them when we deem it necessary. For instance, if I was totally engrossed in playing a game of football and straining all my physical and mental abilities to depose the opposition of the ball and shoot towards the goal but then heard my car alarm sounding and a commotion nearby, getting a ball into the back of a net would no longer concern me. My agential motivation and constraints would shift.

This shifting of agential modes suggests that we are able to hold different motivational or attentional states at the same time but allow one mode to dominate at any particular time. As Nguyen remarks, this idea of 'nested agencies' was denigrated by Stocker (1976) as a form of 'motivational schizophrenia' and aporetic self-deception. But Nguyen argues that the concept of agential layering should not be so readily dismissed and can help us understand how we can be taken on different agencies when playing games. Nguyen argues,

we do have something like Stocker's interrupting clock. It is exactly that moment when we shake ourselves out of absorption in a game, and ask ourselves, "Wait. Are we really having any fun here?" that is the interrupting clock in action. Striving players are, in a crucial sense, Stockerian schizophrenics. We take up and discard temporary agencies whose commitments and ends do not match up with those of our full selves. (Nguyen 2020, 60)

The ability to shift between agencies as Nguyen suggests, allows the players in the interminable tennis rally to give up the point, or alerts me to my car alarm when playing football. It allows us to smoothly and aptly shift our agential mode from one activity to another.

If Nguyen is correct in arguing that we can hold multiple layers of agency at any one time so that we can shift between them depending on our motivation it raises the question as to when or why we would do so. Equally, what does the concept of agential layering say about the value we place on different activities and how we prioritize them? In the previous example, I suggested that becoming aware of my car alarm would shift my agential motivation focused on getting a ball into a net, to one which enables me to investigate the commotion. But the fact that I would choose to do so suggests that (at that moment in time) I place a higher priority on protecting my car than I do on scoring a goal in the game of football. This suggests a normative point about priority and value; if I believed my car might be being stolen, it would be reasonable for me to switch my motivation from football to the alarm. This resonates with an example that Suits (2014) gave in his case of Mario the dedicated driver. In this example, Mario took the game of racing so seriously that when an errant child runs on to the track, rather than leave the track and break a constitutive rule of racing, he runs over the child to continue the race. The example is disturbing because it conflicts with our normative values in that Mario makes the decision to prioritize winning a race over the life of a child. Mario acts as if he had no choice but to adhere to the rules of motor racing.

Nguyen's concept of agential layering helps us to make sense of this example because it indicates how we expect shifts in agential motivation to take place depending on the context. We may hold several motivations at any one time but it is only when they come into direct conflict with each other that we have to choose between them. The scientific literature on the relationship between agency and attention is limited although there are a few fruitful ideas as to how this interaction may work (Hon 2017). One is the notion of attentional sets whereby top-down signals are sent to the various systems used in performing a goal-directed task, and these can alter depending on what is most relevant at the time (Desimone and Duncan 1995; Kastner and Ungerleider 2000). It is akin to watching a play with various actors on stage with the spotlight focused on one actor at a time. Our attention is therefore drawn to where the spotlight is pointed. The concept of agential layering makes sense in the context of attentional sets, as each set can have a different goal directed focus, so I can concentrate on the game of football until my attention is directed towards the car alarm and a new goal-directed activity comes to the fore. Yet this raises the question as to what prompts the change in focus. An answer to this can be found in the 'biased competition' model of attention (Duncan, 1996; Edgar, Edgar, and Styles forthcoming) which argues that our attention, and the resources required to process (or spotlight) it, will be drawn towards whatever stimuli wins the competition in seeking our attention (i.e. the loudest noise, brightest light, or incongruent event). These theories taken together, to some extent, support Nguyen's concept of agential layering and the ability to take up and discard agencies depending on the context.

These theories are limited however in explaining normative aspects of agential layering. In the case of Mario the dedicated driver, it was suggested that maintaining the agency required to race motor cars when a child runs on to the track is to get the priorities wrong. Whilst the 'biased competition' model of attention may suggest that such an unexpected event would cause a shift in agency, it does not guarantee it. This can be demonstrated by replacing the child with a wayward party balloon. A balloon drifting across Mario's path may win the competition for Mario's attention but if Mario chooses to ignore it, there would be no condemnation that he continued with his racing line. Instead, Mario may be applauded for not being distracted in his endeavour to race to the finishing line. Clearly then, there are questions about what kinds of activity ought to be prioritized and where our attention and agency should lie.

Game-playing and value

As Nguyen and others note, games have a paradoxical quality in that the means and the ends are inseparable: the end only has value insofar as the game itself has value. But as Suits also identified, this creates a psychological uneasiness in that we acknowledge the triviality of games in that they are only temporary diversions from other more important aspects of life. Suits further explored this question of how we assess and measure value through his conception of utopia. In Suits' Utopia, all instrumental activities have been eliminated. Such a place would mean we would not need to worry about our physiological needs; we would not need to work in order to provide food, shelter or healthcare. Everything we desire would be available at the metaphorical press of a button. According to Suits, the only activities left would be those pursued for their own sake, and these would essentially consist of games.

However, as Suits' exploration continues it becomes clear that a world in which all instrumental activities have been eliminated is a discomforting experience. This is demonstrated by Suits' characters, John Striver and William Seeker. John Striver does not just want a house; he wants to accomplish building a house. Similarly, William Seeker, does not just want the answers to mathematical and scientific problems, he wants to discover this knowledge for himself. Both characters are aware that their activities fulfil Suits' definition of game-playing (the voluntary acceptance of unnecessary obstacles) but their desire to believe that this striving is necessary to achieve their ends ultimately leads to Grasshopper's vision of the downfall of Utopia:

I saw time passing in Utopia, and I saw [those within it] coming to the conclusion that if their lives were merely games, then those lives were scarcely worth living. Thus motivated, they began to delude themselves into believing that houses made by people were more valuable than houses made by computers, and that long-solved scientific problems needed resolving. They then began to persuade others of the truth of these opinions and even went so far as to represent the computers as the enemies of humanity. Finally they enacted legislation proscribing their use. Then more time passed, and it seemed to everyone that the carpentry game and the science game were not games at all, but vitally necessary tasks which had to be performed in order for human survival. Thus, although all of the apparently productive activities of man were games, they were not believed to be games. Games were once again relegated to the role of mere pastimes useful for bridging the gaps in our serious endeavours. (Suits 2014, 195-196)

Suits' Utopia arguably highlights the value that we place upon activities and the seriousness with which we approach them. Whilst games may hold intrinsic value, this value is diminished because the means to reaching our ends are necessarily inefficient. Nguyen argues that Suits' Utopia tells us more about the value of striving (and seeking) than achieving but it also demonstrates how we prioritize some actions over others.

Games and the grind

What Suits does not consider in his example of John Striver is that it is unlikely that John Striver would continue in his game of house building indefinitely. Whilst John Striver may initially enjoy the game of building houses, there is likely to come a time whereby he finds it a bit of a grind. The reality of game playing is that we are schizophrenic in the Stockerian sense because we become aware that we are holding two conflicting positions: we have to play the game seriously, as if our agency is constrained in the same way that it is in real life, but at the same time, are aware that we are merely acting a role that we can choose to step away from. For John Striver, there is likely to come a time whereby he asks himself why he is going to all the effort of building houses when he does not need to; he could press a button instead. The incongruence occurs when we find ourselves in positions where our inner agency continues to play the game whilst our outer agency asks whether it is worth it.

This experience can be framed through the concept of ‘grinding’ and is familiar to athletes and games players alike. Our initial passion and excitement in game playing wears off and we come to find them repetitive and unengaging until we reach a point where we ask ‘why am I doing this?’ and ‘what is this all for?’ Grinding in games is the process of spending time in mundane, repetitive activity merely to ‘level up’ or to receive new abilities or equipment that only have value in the game itself. In this, it is far more akin to the concept of ‘work’ than ‘play’; the instrumental activity that Suits’ Utopia was designed to eliminate. This absurdity of doing something completely unnecessary and that we find unengaging, yet still continue to do it, was aptly encapsulated by Clive Thompson in Wired Magazine when he wrote,

[Games] let us cast off our mundane existence and become a colorful, empowered hero. And what do we do with this second life? We behave like obedient workers in a Soviet collective outside Stalingrad, circa 1971. ‘Comrade, your job is to collect potatoes’. For seven years. We pay 20 USD a month for this privilege. What the hell is wrong with us? (Thompson 2008)

This type of grinding gameplay is absurd and perhaps highlights a state of confusion between our agential layers. As noted earlier, the uniqueness of games as an art form is the ability to take on and adapt different agential forms. On this account, grinding in games should not be a feature. We should simply decide to leave the game, play a new one, or focus our energy elsewhere. Our striving to complete unnecessary tasks, ones that we are no longer even really enjoying, is absurd. It is absurd to continue playing games when there is no intrinsic or extrinsic reason to do so, but rather do so as a form of compulsion or habit. Whilst my agency is wholly engrossed in playing a game, it makes sense and has value. When I shift agential layers and look at my actions from a broader perspective, I realise how pointless they are. The human ability to view our lives sub specie aeternitatis as Nagel (1971) noted, lets us step back and watch ourselves and our commitment to life with the ‘detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand’. When I step back to consider the fact that I have spent 100+ hours in the mind-numbing process of mining rocks in the game *Elite Dangerous* so that I can trade them to buy a bigger ship that is capable of mining more rocks, the absurdity of my actions becomes clear. My outer agency asks, ‘what have I been doing with my time?’ and then I feel guilty at all the time I have wasted playing this game which has achieved nothing of real value. Although Nguyen is correct in noting that playing games can be valuable in themselves, it becomes problematic and absurd when we find ourselves stuck between layers: when our outer layer wants to pull us away but our inner layer wants to continue. It is perhaps the exemplar of the Stockerian schizophrenic and the connotations to which this term alludes.

Suits may have been right about the psychological disposition of humans to want to think that the activities they are engaged in matter more than they do. But Suits and Nguyen recognize that it is the act of striving towards goals that provides more value than accomplishing them. When we reach our goals, we have to replace them with others so that we feel we always having something worthwhile to strive towards. Suits (2014, 189) himself called this the ‘Alexandrian condition of man’: ‘When there are no more worlds to conquer we are filled not with satisfaction but despair’.

Sometimes however, we become aware of the absurdity of the striving itself. Yorke (2019) suggests the way of avoiding existential boredom and despair is to engage in a ‘positive boredom’ whereby we find tranquillity and acceptance in a game’s familiarity and repetitiveness. But whilst this meditative way of playing games may be fruitful to some, it seems to neglect what most of us ultimately want from games: the fine balance between striving and achieving but also our need for novelty and creativity in play so that our attention and motivation is maintained. Whilst Yorke implies that this can be achieved through players ‘continuously reset[ting] their gameboards’ (Yorke 2019, 369), the game itself needs to be sufficiently flexible and interesting enough that each game is motivating and meaningful in its own right. To avoid the experience of the grind in games, we need to be constantly opened to new agential possibilities. This is perhaps where a game such as *RDR2* succeeds since it allows for multiple layers of agency to exist. The game itself is rich enough, and the agential moves numerous enough, that the likelihood of repetitive or unengaging tasks is diminished.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is much to be taken from Nguyen's analysis of game-playing as an art form. This paper has focused specifically on the concept of agential layering and its relationship to meaning and value. Nguyen is right in noting the importance and uniqueness of agency in games. The best games are those which allow us to stretch our abilities but also our imagination. Games allow us to carve out new ways of being and experiment with the consequences. The fact that I can play and replay a game in a way that is not afforded in other aspects of life, or even with other forms of art, gives it a special value. In this sense, it portrays the ultimate existential value: I can create and recreate myself infinitely. Games allow us to inhabit and direct ways of being which are not afforded in literature or film. However, games may also force us to confront the absurdity of our lives in a way that other activities do not, since we are aware that the goal towards which we are striving is a temporary one that we may choose to ignore. It is 'grinding' in games that perhaps demonstrates the extent of this absurdity the most. It is here we seem find ourselves stuck between agential layers and refuse to stop our Stockerian clock.

Disclosure statement

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