Misaligned Education

Adrian Currie

Penultimate Version, forthcoming in the Journal of the Philosophy of Sport.

I expand and adapt Thi Nguyen's account of games to the context of university humanities education. I analyse 'misalignment', wherein the stakes of success or failure in a game undermine players' capacity to submerge themselves in play, thus missing the associated benefits. I argue that in many ways humanities university education is misaligned: crucial pedagogical goods require submersion, but submersion is undermined by how success or failure underwrites future student success.

1. Introduction

Like every Bachelor of Arts program, the University of Exeter provides a set of reasons to undertake a BA in philosophy aimed at prospective students and their parents. Here are two such reasons[1]:

First: 'From the beginning you'll be encouraged and taught how to think rigorously, defend your views, understand different opinions and ultimately develop a sharp, analytical and open mind'.

Second: 'Get ready for your future career by developing a range of skills valued by a wide range of employers from the media to teaching and the public, private and charity sectors'.

On the face of it, these reasons align: the former lists a set of skills related to your philosophy education; the latter, how those skills aid in your eventually being well-employed. I'm going to argue that the relationship between the kind of education we're talking about—what we might call 'humanities', 'arts' or (if you're from the U.S.) 'liberal arts'—and its being emphasized as

critical for future employment, is more troublesome than appearances first suggest. In short, I'll argue that the consequences of success in humanities education, gainful employment say, actively works against the mindset required to gain that education. I don't pretend this is a particularly original claim,[2] but I'll get there via an original route: Thi Nguyen's recent work on games. I hope this provides some new insights into the nature of the problem.

I'll start in section 2 by describing the relevant aspects of Nguyen's view. In section 3 I'll shift to humanities education characterizing its value and drawing parallels between it and Nguyen's account of games. I'll then (in section 4) introduce the notion of 'misalignment': a circumstance where the consequences of success or failure in a game undermines some of the goods playing that game is supposed to generate. In section 5 I'll argue that misalignment plausibly occurs in humanities education. The consequences of success in humanities education—particularly those relating to employment—make it difficult for students to approach their education in a way which achieves some of the stated goals of that education. Finally, in section 6 I'll sketch a space of solutions. A few caveats.

First, I'll use the term 'humanities' as a catch-all for what is often called 'arts' or 'liberal arts' education. This includes, but is not limited to, history, cultural anthropology, various 'studies' disciplines and so forth. I'll often refer to philosophy simply because it's what I know best. Second, I'll not be arguing that university education literally *is* a game in Nguyen's sense; it may be so or not, but what matters for my position is that there are relevant analogies. Third, I won't deny that humanities education makes students more suitable for employment. Rather, I suggest that because the success or failure of such an education has such high stakes downstream, it undermines the uptake of some critical value of that education. Fourth, my claims are limited to humanities education. It may well be that more vocational education (the law, say) or more scientific subjects are misaligned to greater or lesser extents in the sense I'll discuss, but that is beyond my scope here. So, let's think about games.

2. Striving Games

Nguyen focuses on *Suitsian* games. We can understand these as having three components. First, *pre-lusory goals*, a '*specific achievable state of affairs*' (Suits 1973, 40, italics in original). Many activities could count as pre-lusory goals: climbing a mountain, hitting a wicket with a ball, figuring out who killed Mr Gold, writing an essay. Second, these goals are transformed and structured by a set of *constitutive constraints* which delineate what actions are allowed and are not in achieving that goal: climbing without ropes, bowling a ball at a wicket from a specific distance with a straight arm, suggesting murder suspects, locations and weapons one at a time, fitting the essay within a specific number of words. Third, from the pre-lusory goals and the constitutive constraints emerge the *lusory goals*: basically, how to achieve the aim within the constraints. A successful ropeless ascent; bowling the batter out; winning *Cluedo*; passing the assignment. Players take up temporary ends towards meeting such goals. Although not all games are Suitsian, many are: from sports and parlour-games to board and computer games. When I say 'games', I mean games of that nature.

We play games for a variety of reasons, and Nguyen makes a crucial distinction between *striving* and *achievement* play. In the latter, the player's *motivations* and the game's *goal* align: the player plays to win the game. The former is more complex: while the goal of the game is to win, the player is motivated by something else. Perhaps they want to have a good time with their friends, challenge themselves, or experience the joys of the game itself. In doing so, players do typically aim to win, but winning isn't the point of their playing. Much of Nguyen's work focuses on *aesthetic striving*, playing a game in order to gain the aesthetic value of the game: the satisfaction of a well-aimed ball slipping between the batter's legs and cracking into the wickets, the spark of deductive realization in seeing that Miss Scarlet must be the killer, the smooth flow of a well-placed handhold. Achieving such aesthetic goods, Nguyen argues, often requires *absorption*: despite our varying striving reasons for play, *in play*, these must be put aside, or

distanced from our attention. 'If the striving player recalls their reason for playing— the joys of the struggle— then they won't be able to achieve it. Instead, they will be caught in a curious form of double-consciousness' (55).

So, Nguyen focuses on a particular set of the goods of gameplay, aesthetic striving goods, wherein the player's motivation is not to win the game, but they are 'pursuing the win for the sake of the struggle' (8), and specifically for the aesthetic goods associated with that struggle.

Finally, Nguyen argues that games are an artform. Following Dewey's notion that an art 'crystalizes' aesthetic experiences from everyday life, he argues that as music is the art of sound and painting is the art of vision, so are games the art of agency. Our lives are awash with agency, and there are aesthetic pleasures associated with them.

> Games can refine those pleasures, concentrate them, and present us with novel aspects of them. For example: doing math, philosophy, and the like, can give rise to aesthetic experiences of calculation, puzzle solving, and glorious leaps of the mind. Chess takes this sort of activity and crystallizes it. Chess offers us a shaped activity particularly fecund in aesthetically rich experiences of the intellect (102).

On this view, the constitutive constraints and lusory goals of a game *encode* a form of agency, in playing the game, then, we learn about and occupy that agency. *Cluedo* involves fairly simple deductive reasoning (*Mystery of the Abby* is much better), as players carefully eliminate the option-space through their questioning. As such, it encodes that kind of deductive, eliminative agency.

Moving forwards, I'll argue that (1) formal university education can also be understood as encoding forms of agency, and that (2) just as in aesthetic striving games, some of the goods of humanities education, require particular forms of absorption.

3. Games & Education

There is an enormous amount of literature on the nature of education and its place in society. Here, I'll focus on the analogies between Nguyen's analysis of Suitsian games and formal university education. I'll say something about the value of humanities education, before arguing that it encodes agency and involves absorption, then make a few initial points arising from the discussion thus far.

3.1 Humanities & Value

What is valuable about humanities education? However much we or our students might value the *content* of such an education, it is typically the *skills* it brings that are emphasized. These skills are very broad, from writing and time-organization, to research, to critical thinking, and so on. As we saw in the introduction, these are often emphasized in terms of *transferability*. They don't just help us do history or social anthropology or whatever, but make us attractive as job candidates. Of course, there are also more high-minded accounts of the value of such education. Let's take a single example from philosopher and educator Charles Wegener.

> [Humanities education aims to] organize scholarship so that it will create and nurture individuals as freely functioning participants in the community. It is argued that there is no simple link between the acquisition of knowledge and the growth of a mind, but that the process of growth is mediated by habitual reflection on relationships between various activities. Liberal education, with its emphasis on diversity, technique and procedure, rather than on subject matter, is concluded to be the working structure of an autonomous intelligence. (Wegener 1978, abstract)

Wegener here makes claims about the value of humanities (for him, 'liberal arts') education, how that value is gained, and how liberal education achieves it. The point of humanities

education is far more high-minded than 'transferable skills': it provides a kind of autonomous intelligence which matters for functioning within democratic communities. Obtaining said autonomous intelligence is not simply a matter of *knowing more stuff*, but rather requires a set of diverse, reflective activities. Students researching the humanities, even within a single discipline degree program (although this is particularly true of traditional 'liberal arts' education) are exposed to a variety of perspectives, methods and techniques. In grappling with these, it is claimed, such autonomous intelligence is developed.

Where autonomous intelligence and related skills are indeed often emphasized as the point of humanities education, it is the value of such skills for future employment that are typically pointed to in defences of them. A quick internet search coughs up dozens of such articles.[3] My aim downstream is not to claim that education is not, nor shouldn't be, economically valuable for those so educated. Rather, I'll suggest that its central place in economic systems undermines uptake of autonomous intelligence.

3.2 Education as Striving

I want to draw two analogies between humanities education and Nguyen's analysis of games. First, course structure can be understood as encoding agency. Second, 'autonomous intelligence' is a *striving good*.

Without arguing that formal education is in fact a game, I think it fairly straightforward to demonstrate that, like games, formal education often encodes forms of agency. Like games, it provides a simplified, quantified space which isolates and potentially develops particular agential modes. In standard humanities courses, students gain grades by completing tasks, most typically writing essays of particular lengths, with particular structures, and so on. There is a fairly clear analogy here between such requirements and games. A student might have a pre-lusory goal such as 'make an argument' or 'get a first' or even 'get a degree'. Various assignments, grading

criteria and suchlike act as constitutive constraints: the rules by which such goals might be achieved. Thus, the lusory goals of formal education emerge. In this respect, at least, students taking courses are playing games.

Recall that games encode agency by crystalizing common experiences of agency. Eliminative deduction is a common mode of reasoning, and *Cluedo* focuses on that mode via its specific rules of play. Similarly, reasoning, writing, communication and suchlike are all common parts of everyday agency. The constitutive constraints of university courses to at least some extent crystalize these. The activity of, say, *writing a philosophy essay* is not like writing in normal contexts: there are particular constraints, say, related to number of words, answering the essay question, rules regarding citations and where sources may be drawn from, and so forth. And moreover, these are geared towards particular marking criteria, which in combination with (let's be honest) various quirks of the marker, decide the outcome of the assignment. It is plausible then, that essay writing, and other such assignments, encode modes of agency. And, even more explicitly than for the encoded agency of games, these forms are supposed—in fact the *point* of them is—to be useful outside of that context. Writing a good philosophy essay, for example, requires a combination of clarity, rigor, focus and creativity: a mode of agency, once learned, widely applicable across contexts. The idea that humanities education teaches transferable skills is no joke.

So, if humanities education can be understood as analogous to games in encoding agency, what kind of play does developing autonomous intelligence require? Here, I'll make a psychological gambit: it requires *striving*. Recall that in striving the explicit lusory aim comes apart from the purpose in playing. Perhaps achievement play, playing to win, is sufficient for some of the skills in humanities education. Good bibliographic practices, for instance. But not so for autonomous intelligence. I think it plausible that to learn this, students must take risks, actively extend themselves beyond the text they've been given to read. This inevitably involves

missteps, mistakes and—perhaps—the occasional bad grade. It further requires a particular kind of immersion: the student engages in the practices at hand for their own sake, or at least for the enjoyment and satisfaction and challenge of the task, as opposed to getting a good grade. In short, students should be striving players rather than achieving players in order to adopt the immersion that developing autonomous intelligence requires.

My gambit is, no doubt, psychological: I could be just plain wrong. And note that the claim is not that formal university education is the only way (or even a good way) to develop autonomous intelligence (far from it!). Regardless, I think it plausible that for at least a significant proportion of students such immersed striving is an enabling condition for enculturing autonomous intelligence.

3.3 Course Design & Value-Capture

Before shifting to misalignment, I'll outline two upshots for humanities education arising from the discussion thus far. The first relates to the analogy between education and games, the second to the 'gamification' of education. The former, perhaps, suggests that in some ways education is *insufficiently like games*. The latter, perhaps, suggests that in some ways education is *too game-like*.

I've argued that we can understand various assignments as encoding forms of agency. In attempting an essay, a student adopts and learns the forms of agency related to that kind of writing. Recall Wenger's idea that intellectual autonomy is built via 'diverse reflections across numerous activities'—not diverse *content*, but diverse *activities.* Insofar as Wenger is right about this, and insofar as intellectual autonomy is what we want students to develop, it is worth asking ourselves whether the standardization of course and assignment structure is a good thing. More generally, it is worth asking just what forms of agency we are encoding. In my experience, the

vast majority of assessment in humanities education consists of writing essays either in exam settings or otherwise: although the content certainly differs, in many ways the *agency does not*.

Nguyen argues that a major advantage of gameplay isn't simply the particular agencies encoded in games, but that in playing a variety of games we learn about, and develop, the flexibility of our agency. To the extent that assignment structures in humanities education are homogenous, they appear to be teaching students to play the *same game over and over again*. Perhaps it would be better if instead humanities education were a series of different games, encoding quite different kinds of agency. This is speculative, but my aim is to point out that once we see formal education, particularly assessment, as encoding agency, this raises new questions about how we should approach pedagogical design. My hunch is that it underwrites reasons for diversity.

A discussion of the relationship between games and education would be incomplete without at least passing reference to 'gamification'. This is, in effect, the exporting of game-like features into non-games, most particularly quantification and reward-structures. For Nguyen, gamification is not in itself problematic. He thinks the problem lies in one of its potential consequences: *value-capture*. Value-capture occurs when our subtle, rich values are transformed into simplistic, quantified values in a detrimental way. Students should no-doubt value getting high grades in their education, but there is a world of difference between valuing high grades in the interests of a better education, or even more job opportunities, and valuing high grades *for their own sake.* Although gamification of pedagogy is typically seen as an educational tool (e.g., Caponetto, Earp & Ott 2014), the dangers of phenomena like value-capture in education are also commonly recognised (Maise & Hanna 2019). As we'll see, I think gamification becomes particularly egregious when combined with a different phenomenon: misalignment.

4. Misalignment

As we've seen, Nguyen provides a rich account of the agency and art of Suitsian games, one which can be applied via analogy (at the very least) to pedagogical contexts. He also provides grounds for worry about how value capture might undermine the lofty goals of humanities education. In this section, I want to highlight a way in which games themselves can go wrong, which I'll call 'misalignment'. In the next, I'll suggest misalignment is occurring in humanities education.

Nguyen introduces the notion of *stupid games*: 'games that one has to try to win to really experience the game, but where the most enjoyable experience is one of failure' (41-42). These act as an existence proof for striving play: to engage in a stupid game, you must properly submerge yourself in gameplay, strive to win, but winning is not the point. Nguyen's central example is *Bag-on-Head*. In this game, players obscure their vision by placing paper bags on their heads, and then endeavour to remove one another's bags—if you lose your bag, you're out, watching from the sidelines:

> The game, of course, involves lots of stumbling and tripping and flailing around by people with bags on their heads. And the best vantage point from to watch all this is that of the losers, watching from the side. And, at some point, there will be only one person still stumbling blindly around the room with a bag on their head, fumbling around for the other nonexistent opponents, while everybody else gets to watch, desperately trying not to laugh. That last person is the winner, and the very best part of the game is seeing how long it takes them to figure out that they have, in fact, won. (10)

Let's imagine we all go to our rich friend's soiree and, at some point in the night, a round of bag-on-head is suggested. We play to much hilarity and highjinks. However, our rich friend is not keen on the game, considering it an absurd, silly waste of time (perhaps they are obstinate achievement players!). As everyone agrees on playing a second game, our rich friend, with a sly

grin, raises their hand and offers their extraordinary collection of Fabergé eggs as a prize to the victor.

No doubt we, the partygoers, will all play the second game, and no doubt we will endeavour to win. However, I imagine our capacity to enjoy the absurdity—to gain the specific aesthetic good that striving in a stupid game engenders—that is, our being properly submerged, will be undermined. The stakes of the game will be so high that those who are out will likely be unable to enjoy watching the potential future-millionaires stumble about. Those still in the game will be too focused on the transformative capacity those eggs could have for our lives—debts repaid, houses purchased, retirement sorted—that we will be trying to win, but crucially not able to be submerged in the specific way required to enjoy the stupidity.

This is an example of 'misalignment'. Some of the goods of gameplay require particular forms of submersion, but the consequences of winning or losing can undermine precisely those forms. *Misalignment* occurs in gameplay when (1) there is some particular good gained through submerged striving play, and (2) the consequences of achievement undermine players' capacity to be submerged, and thus gain that good. Note that misalignment need not be perfect: some players might be indifferent to riches and still enjoy the game of bag-on-head, or others might, despite themselves, get swept up in the idiocy of the game and forget the high stakes. But regardless, it is psychologically plausible that in the described scenario the consequences of victory—a collection of mind-bogglingly expensive jewelled eggs—will block the immersion required to enjoy the absurdity.

The underlying point of misalignment is that the achievement of certain goods in gameplay often require matching stakes. Poker for pennies might be less exciting than poker for pounds, but the former might offer freedom to experiment that the latter lacks.

5. Misaligned Education

I've suggested it is plausible that the more high-falutin' gains of humanities education, which I'm calling 'autonomous intelligence', requires a form of immersion allowing students to take risks, be creative, and to engage in the work for its own sake. In other words, just as striving play involves a disconnect from the consequences of achievement and the player's immersion, so too does gaining autonomous education require striving. I've also introduced a way in which striving games can go wrong: misalignment. Here, the consequences of achievement undermine the kinds of immersion required for gaining particular goods. I'll now bring these together and argue that the place of university degrees in future lives undermines the development of an autonomous intelligence: humanities education is misaligned.

Recall the two goods of humanities education with which I opened: the development of an autonomous intelligence, and the development of skills which future employers will value. Indeed, future employers may exactly value autonomous intelligence, but I think it plausible that the emphasis on—and *fact of*—future success relying on doing well at university undermines the kind of creative risk-taking that developing an autonomous intelligence requires. To draw out the analogy, just as the future prospect of Fabergé eggs likely breaks a player of bag-on-head's submersion towards absurd fun, a student's future job prospects undermines their capacity to discuss and debate ideas, read complex texts, and write engaged essays, with the kind of submersion and striving required to develop an autonomous intelligence. Note that this being the case turns on various features of student's psychology. It need not undermine all students' immersion, just as I might find myself immersed in bag-on-head despite the artificially raised stakes.

That achieving a particular result—in the UK a 2.1 or first, say—acts as a barrier to employment or other future prospects, raises the stakes of achievement in the quantified outputs of education in way that opens the door to misalignment. Education's cost in terms of, say, student loans, further raises the stakes. This makes assessment a curious double-edged

sword. On the one hand, providing results in assessment, be they quantified or more qualitative, are in some sense necessary as they provide the constitutive constraints of the 'game': rules are required to set the aims and structures within which students learn and occupy the kinds of agency that educators wish to engender. But on the other hand, they are a constant reminder that, for many students at least, aspects of their future lives turn on their results. In those university environments where students are also constantly bombarded with job fairs, employment seminars, and internship opportunities the message is loud and clear: the *point* of this education is for future job prospects, and for many this plausibly breaks immersion via misalignment. Or so I suspect. To what extent this is the case is an empirical question requiring empirical investigation, but certainly anecdotally, and in my experience, the constant reminders of university being *for* future job prospects make students conservative and risk-averse in their learning.

This, I think, is particularly pernicious when combined with value-capture. Consider the UK government's use of *Longitudinal Education Outcomes* (LEO) data. This measures 'how much UK graduates of different courses at different universities are earning, either one, three or five years since graduating' (*Parliament & Government* 2019, 1), with attempts to control for socio-economic background and so on. Such data is explicitly encouraged to be used by students in making decisions about which universities to attend and which degrees to seek (although the government won't use it for funding decisions). LEO data allows us to infer the earning capacity of an average student with a particular degree from a particular university. In philosophy, the relevantly high earning-potential (compared to other humanities subjects) of graduates is typically held up as a way of pushing back against the perception that such degrees are useless.

LEO data is intended to be a proxy, and useful in combination with other factors in helping students make decisions about their education. However, as we've seen, value capture occurs when a rich, opaque value is replaced by a simple, quantified value with negative results.

Continual focus on the results of assessments, degree qualifications, and the relationship between these and future earning potential surely make value-capture loom large. A student interested in developing critical, rigorous, reflective and creative thinking finds themselves aiming for a first, say. But value-capture is not the end of the story. Because even if capture does not occur, misalignment likely still undermines immersion. Further, misalignment plausibly blocks students who are *only* interested in getting a degree, those for whom education is simply valuable for future prospects, from becoming immersed despite themselves.

The quantification of education, and its being tied to further job prospects, means students who value education for its own sake must actively work against both value capture and misalignment if they are to develop autonomous intelligence. Moreover, it likely makes the achievement of such goals yet more the domain of those with the privilege of secure financial futures.

6. Mitigating Strategies

Specific solutions to misalignment in humanities education are beyond both my paygrade and available space, but the present analysis does point towards several strategies for mitigating educational misalignment.

Generally, misalignment is due to a mismatch between the requirements of immersion and the consequences of success or failure. Thus, solutions require de-coupling. Two rather blunt solutions would be to either simply deny the value of the goods immersion brings or block the consequences. In the present context, this would be to say either that autonomous intelligence is worthless, or to make it such that university results play no role in future employment. The former is—I hope for obvious reasons—undesirable, the latter opens a range of complex questions about how educations fits into society, who it is for, and how it is funded that I think are urgent but I can't hope to tackle here.

We can divide less blunt solutions, I think, into *individual* and *structural* solutions.

Individual solutions aim to provide students with the resources to become appropriately immersed despite misalignment. For many this is likely possible. Professional athletes, for analogy, also face misalignment. To play well, they must be immersed in play. But in many competitions the stakes of victory are extremely high. And thus, the professional athlete must find a way to be immersed despite the consequences of victory or loss. Perhaps for students too, such psychological solutions are available. Anecdotally, some of my students report that open discussion of both value capture and misalignment have helped them understand some of the challenges they face with immersion, and this in itself has aided in their striving.

Structural solutions seek to mitigate misalignment by manipulating the constitutive constraints of courses and assessment. One approach is simply to lower the stakes for some assessments. One fairly common structural feature of university degrees is that earlier assessments matter less for degree classification than later assessments, both within a course and across a degree program. However, in the context of the whole education system being misaligned, as students see the value of work in terms of degree classification, the result for those earlier assessments is often not more immersion, but less effort. Another set of structural solutions target assessment design. Are there ways of targeting autonomous intelligence more directly and explicitly, and so, in a sense optimizing assessment towards the kind of absorption required? Perhaps.

None of these solutions are perfect, but neither are they mutually exclusive. Potentially all of them open tricky questions about access, privilege and the purpose and point of education. And indeed, given that misalignment arises from how education itself is situated in society, both strategic and individual strategies enacted within a university context can only be seen as mitigating. Regardless, if we genuinely believe in autonomous intelligence's value, and my

psychological gambit pertaining to it requiring absorption pays out, then humanities education's misalignment is a tension we must both confront and navigate.

Let's return to our analogy between games and education. Considering value-capture, we might worry that the quantified, simplified nature of education is *too game-like*; threatening to morph the rich, subtle values of education into something much lesser. But considering misalignment, we might also say that education is *insufficiently game-like*. For many games, it is the lack of stakes, the low-consequences of success and failure, which enable the kind of absorbed, aesthetically-rich striving that Nguyen's analysis focuses on; insofar as education is misaligned, analogous goods are undermined, difficult-to-reach, missed, and lost.

References

Caponetto, I., Earp, J., & Ott, M. (2014, October). Gamification and education: A literature review. In European Conference on Games Based Learning (Vol. 1, p. 50). Academic Conferences International Limited.

Hanson, C. (2011). The community college and the good society: How the liberal arts were undermined and what we can do to bring them back. Transaction Publishers.

Maiese, M., & Hanna, R. (2019). The mind-body politic. Springer.

Nguyen, C. T. (2020). *Games: Agency as Art.* Oxford University Press, USA.

Parliament & Government. (2019). The uses and limits of Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. Briefing Paper: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/uses-and-limits-of-leo-data.aspx

Suits, B. (1973/2014). *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia.* Broadview Press.

Wegener, C. (1978). *Liberal Education and the Modern University.* University of Chicago Press.

[1] http://www.exeter.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/philosophy/philosophy/, retrieved 16/3/2021

[2] For instance, see chapter 4 of Maise & Hanna 2019; Hanson 2011

[3] See, for instance, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190401-why-worthless-humanities-degrees-may-set-you-up-for-life