

# Gameness as the Experience of Cognitive Autonomy

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## Introduction

Playing games like Chess, Call of Duty or World of Warcraft involve actions that are inherently pleasurable and performed for their own sake, rather than being performed in order to realize values outside the activity itself. In this regard, game actions are no different from many other actions that are inherently pleasurable, such as reading literature, playing music or sailing. In this paper I will present a proposal about the connection between the experience of performing game actions and the subjects' autonomy that constitute an essential part of their nature. My two main claims will be:

- 1) A central set of in-game actions are experienced by the player with a ludic phenomenal quality that set them both epistemically and motivationally apart from other actions.
- 2) The ludic phenomenal quality of such in-game actions is due to the first-person epistemic identification of the players' cognitive autonomy that occurs when she is subjecting to her own authority in adhering to norm with self-determined contents.

I will proceed in the following fashion.<sup>1</sup> First, I will motivate and explain the idea that there is a ludic phenomenal quality that accompanies gaming acts. Next, I will attempt to delineate a cognitivist approach to the existence of this putative phenomenal quality with reference to a cognitive phenomenon I suggest is exemplified by Kant and Schillers theories of the experience of beauty. The cognitive phenomenon in question is that a phenomenal quality can arise from certain challenges of cognitive integration a subject can be presented with which in turn are externalized by the subject as being given as the objective content of an experience. I will then turn to the performance of actions, in which I will distinguish between two forms of autonomy, conative and cognitive. Finally, I will use this account of externalization to identify the nature of the proposed ludic phenomenal quality when a subject is acting in accordance with game rules.

## Externalization and Cognitive Integration

It is clear that many of the things we do, contemplate or experience typically are accompanied with characteristic feelings and emotions. However, I would like to make a distinction between emotions and feelings that are regularly *correlated* with certain mental states or episodes, and the fact that an experiential content itself is presented to a subject with a characteristic *phenomenal quality*. I think that such phenomenal qualities can be found in many contexts, such as in the experience of secondary sensory qualities, of seeing beautiful objects, listening to music, contemplating jokes and so on. What I propose is that gaming

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<sup>1</sup> This short paper only serve outline my position, and is not much more than handout. Unfortunately, no space is given to a critical discussion of the position itself. The conference presentation will provide more context to the main claims.

actions, such as performing a move in chess, shooting in Call of Duty, or knocking over a turret in Portal are experienced by the agent with characteristic ludic phenomenal quality that serves to distinguish from the phenomenal quality of normal action. If I jump up a step on a stairwell on my way home from the office, this act has a *different feel to it* compared to jumping to a ledge in Donkey Kong, and solving a puzzle in Portal has a *different feel to it* than performing a similar task outside the game, such as finding the right connector to port at back of a laptop computer. If I were to describe this quality, in the same way that one would attempt to describe the character of wine, I would say that when I jump onto a ledge in Donkey Kong, I experience a certain pleasure of empowerment, of titillation, of a sense of freedom connected to the specific act itself, and a sense of self-determination, but perhaps also perhaps a quality of emptiness and lack of substantiality that I do not feel in ordinary action.

I'm not sure if everyone will go along with me in these intuitions, but even so, an objection might be that the putative phenomenal quality is in fact of the very same kind as the feelings of exaltation and fun that come from ordinary play, whether they be based on rule-based gaming or free-form play. Yet I do not think that this is the case, for two reasons. In ordinary cases of play, there is a much closer connection with feelings enjoyment and positive valuation than there is for the proposed phenomenal quality of gaming actions. If something is no longer experienced as play because it is no longer fun, or if it is no longer voluntary, then it also ceases to be "play" in the free-form sense of the word. While on the other hand the proposed ludic quality is inherently pleasurable, it is certainly also possible to tire from it: it can become *displeasurable*, such as when you play too much Tetris, yet the actions still count as gameplay. Furthermore, it seems to me that the characteristic feelings one has during free-form play are exactly the same as the feelings can be present in serious contexts, such as when you are working really well, or as a fisherman pulling up one fish after the other.

My main purpose in this paper is constructive: to offer an account of game actions that may be put to use to understand games and computer games as motivational systems. If the solution is attractive, it might make us more inclined to go along with the intuitions I am attempting to appeal to. I would like to pursue the idea that the ludic phenomenal quality – or character of "gameness" – that accompanies gaming acts is not a purely psychological phenomenon, in the sense of emotions and feelings that come and go in the flow of our mental lives, but rather *an aspect of the rational functioning of belief formation, experience and rational action*. The main claim will be that experiences of certain states of affairs get a phenomenal quality that is a form of epistemic access to the way in which the cognition of the state of affairs take place.

This idea is similar in certain respects to Kant and Schelling's theories of beauty. Kant separated between a sensuous world revealed by perceptual experience, which is determinist in nature, and a noumenal world in which the subject were posited to exhibit the possibility of freedom. These metaphysical claims created a problem for Kant with regard to how we can perceive purpose in nature, since this involves being experientially exposed to relations that putatively were only founded in the noumenal world. It is the context of this perceived dilemma that Kant holds that the phenomenon of beauty is the result of the *free play* of the understanding in perceiving purposeful forms in nature and in artefacts. The experience of beauty is in other words conceived by Kant to be a product of the mind's mental freedom and autonomy in assigning normative structures in the world, such as harmony, perfection and function. Schiller accentuated this line of thought when he put forward the idea that there is a deeply rooted connection between human autonomy and the experience of beauty. He distinguished between a "formal drive", which is the impetus an individual has remain in

accordance with the timeless demands of how he ought to be, and the “sensuous drive” which is drive to be determined by the timely contents of perceptual experience. Schiller famously held that one must posit a “play drive” which mediates between the timeless demands of subjective identity the one hand, and the givenness and situatedness provided the sensuous drive. Beauty, according to Schiller, is “freedom in appearance, autonomy in appearance” (Meier and Schiller 2004, 400)

Assessing these ideas depends to a large extent on accepting the specifics of the Kantian epistemology, but there may be a central thought that is expressed in Schillers play drive and in Kant’s theory of beauty that can be brought forth by the following succession of points:

(1) S perceives that  $p$  with reference to object O

however

(2) The object O referenced in  $p$  is perceived to have a purposeful form that cannot be derived from the perceptual content that  $p$

so

(3) S by an autonomous mental act externalize a purposeful form to object O

and for this reason

(4) S perceives O with a phenomenal quality of beauty,

which means that

(5) S perception of  $p$  in a beautiful manner is an awareness of the autonomy of S.

I will propose that this line of thought, exemplify a connection between a *process of cognitive integration* that is taking place in order to perceive that  $p$ , and the peculiarly rational demands implied by subjecting to an *objectification of features* perceived in  $p$ , which leads to a distinguishing epistemic *modus* to the experience of  $p$  which is identical to a phenomenal *experiential quality* that corresponds with the specifics of the cognitive integration. The externalization of objective features must be understood as a certain functional characteristic that comes with occupying the object place in experiencing that  $p$ .

Generally speaking, the rational role of cognitive states like beliefs and episodes like judgments or perceptions is to adequately represent the world. Inherent the objective purport of such states are strictures on the role of being a *subjective take on the world* versus the *role of the world itself*, ones that are parts of the anatomy such states.

The point is familiar: in order for some subject to represent the world as seeming to be the case, the objective correlate to the content must be *independent* of the attitude from which it is directed. It is hard to go beyond metaphors to explain the feature of the anatomy of rational cognition, but the idea is clear enough. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously constructed a thought-experiment in which he tried to build language that merely referred to sensory impression. In such a case, he famously concluded there would be no difference between seeming to be a

right application of a word of the sensory language and actually applying the word correctly. (Wittgenstein and Anscombe 1967). John McDowell, in a much discussed book on the mind-world relationship based, similarly gives expression to the similar idea in that he holds that mere coherence of beliefs would be a “frictionless spinning in the void” since without the “givenness” offered by perceptual content there will be nothing for cognitive mental states to be about (McDowell 1996). David Wiggins, drawing on Aristotle's descriptions in *De Anima* on animal movement, states that in order for a judgment to be possible “there must be something potentially resistant, and outside the act of judgment itself, upon which the mind can gain purchase and *go forward* in judgment or denial.” (Wiggins 1980, 210). This feature of the subjective-objective relationship might be labelled the “immovably aspect” of the object position in the anatomy of mental states with an objective purport. This immovability aspect is paradigmatically provided by perception, but which is also present in rational and ethical norms for the very same reasons.

The general connection I am interested in is one in which there is an externalization of features that concern how we perform a cognitive integration of the experienced content, much in the same way Kant conceives the understanding as projecting objective purpose into the objective position, without actually finding it in experience. It might be useful to contrast the feature of “cognitive integration” with other “response dependent” aspects of the world that we relate to in cognition and experience.

There are many objective contents we relate to that are directed at matters that in some sense owe their existence to some subjective aspect, such as the experience of secondary sensory qualities, which depends on the way in which electromagnetic radiation is picked up by our sensory organs, or social properties, like that of being a waiter or having monetary value, which depends on communal acceptance. The feature of response-dependence that I find in the Kant/Schiller stories, however, concerns not the way in which experience tracks certain properties given in perception, whether they are dependent on relations to other factors or not, but rather certain systematic ways in which they *create challenges* for how to fit some content with our understanding. It is not clear to me that the Kantian theory of beauty is correct, so I will illustrate the feature of “cognitive integration” further in the phenomenon of humor, which it seems to me to provide a clearer example.

We find humor in a variety of settings, in representations of such as drawings or film, or simply in contemplating certain ideas expressed in verbal jokes. A trite example is the perception of a man that is slipping on a banana peel. I believe we also here have a case in which some fact *p*, when cognized, can be cognized with a characteristic phenomenal quality, in this case a *comic phenomenal quality*. A traditional approach to humor holds that the humorous component comes from a form of incongruence in how we cognize the world.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we can imagine that a subject impose certain mental “scripts” that he use to order his understanding of the world in the form of presuppositions for beliefs, anticipations schemes, normative assessments such as dignity, appropriateness, moral value and so on.

Thus, when he perceives a state of affairs like a man slipping on a banana peel, an incongruence is created between the original understanding script, and the one that is established after the fall has been perceived. A certain process of cognitive integration of the

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<sup>2</sup> For a classic statement of the incongruence idea, see Beattie (Beattie 1778). A recent approach similar approach is found in Hurley et.al., according to which humor has its origin in a cognitive error detection device. (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2013)

two scripts is made to supervene on features of the perceptual situation that gives rise to an *integration challenge* which corresponds to the humorous. However, the humorous, despite having purely subjective origin, is being attributed to the given situation itself, as if it were perceptual content and as if it conformed to the “immovability aspect” of objective purport. In the case of a man slipping on the banana peel, we find the situation *itself* humorous and the experience of it for this reason comes flavored with a comic phenomenal quality.

This, in other words, exemplifies the connection between rational functioning of the mind and the phenomenal quality that I wish to put to use to understand the ludic phenomenal quality as well. In short, there is a process of objective externalization that gives rise to a form of indirect epistemic access to the subjective integration challenge in question. When perceiving a humorous situation, the comic phenomenal qualities serve to make us acutely aware of the features of the situation that gives rise to problems of cognitive integration, and the comic phenomenal quality may be hypothesized to simply be a form of access to a particular form of integration challenge.

### **Conative and Cognitive Autonomy in Action**

In a traditional game the player is acting in accordance with a set of game rules, and in a computer game, many of these rules are substituted with a system that transform input from the controllers into output on a screen with the help of algorithms. I will start out with the games governed by the existence of game-rules, and then later on comment on the game mechanics as provided by computer games.

The big difference for game actions compared with the examples of humor and beauty, is that the proposed ludic phenomenal quality is not directly an aspect of perceptual experience, but rather postulated as being present as a quality of the execution of actions. The general idea is that a gamer in performing a gaming action, is having an epistemic access to his own autonomy because he voluntarily following rules, in the same manner that a comic phenomenal quality represents a way of being aware of an incongruence in cognition.

What is important to my proposal is that gaming rules are different from other sort of rules, and in order to get at the ways in which gaming rules engages aspects of autonomy, I must comment on the components of action and autonomy that will be important to the proposal.

Autonomy in action is broadly the based on the concept of being self-governed, or of being a self-initiator of ones actions; however it can be held that the success in executing a capacity for self-governance or self-initiation is subject to two different ways in which it may be manifested. In a standard model for action, one can identify a several components in a rational action based on a belief-desire model. Hence when a subject S performs a  $\phi$ -ing, then S does so on the basis of a *motivational set of beliefs and desires*, which forms the basis for *practical reasoning* on how to obtain the content of some desire, and the formation and execution of an *intention*, with which S attempts to *attain the goal* expressed by the content of the desire.

The autonomy of an individual can be tied to the ability of an agent S to voluntarily make the world fit with the content of the desire, and in a manner that normally allows a free choice between several alternatives. I propose to call this capacity to make the world fit with the desires, for a *conative autonomy*, since it involves a voluntary act, and the connection with rationality is shown in the fact that the aspect self-governance is manifested in the

effectiveness of the individual in making the world fit with his desires. This aspect of the autonomous action can also be extended to certain mental actions, such as actions that consist in doing calculations, imagining and the like, where the aim of the mental action is to attain some mental goal.

However, as is evident in this traditional model, rational action also depends on a different way of being autonomous, because in acting in this fashion, both the beliefs (and in some cases also the desires) in the motivational set must also be *appropriately formed*, in order for the individual to count as initiator of his actions. Thus beliefs must conform to the *norms of appropriate belief formation*. To do this, there exist *cognitive* as opposed to *conative* criteria for what counts as autonomous action. When a belief  $p$  is formed, then it is involved in a different direction of fit, according to the belief that  $p$  must fit with the world, rather than the opposite direction for desires and intentions, those that aim at goal attainment. When a belief that  $p$  is formed it must also be formed in such a way that  $p$  is likely to be true. An individual that lacks this sort of ability can be held to lose his status to be a self-initiator or self-legislator, since he will then also lose authority as well as control over his actions, such as when because he is under influence of others, or when he is being exposed to propaganda or is under influence of drugs. In this case, it might be said that autonomy of the individual does not consist in choosing between a multiplicity of choices, but rather in the ability to conform to an independent standard for what one *ought to believe* or *ought to do* under the circumstances. The cognitive autonomy then consists in voluntarily subjugating to the norms in question.

### **Game Rules and Voluntary Self-Subjugation to Arbitrary Norms**

A gaming action naturally falls under the heading of rational action more generally, but given the distinctions and conceptual apparatus provided in the previous sections I am now in position to outline the announced view on relationship between game actions and an experience of autonomy when following game-rules.

The connection between action and experience can be indicated by the following succession of points:

(1) S performs a  $\phi$ -ing in accordance with game rules R

and

(2) If S performs a  $\phi$ -ing then S knows/experiences that S performs a  $\phi$ -ing

and

(3) If S performs a  $\phi$ -ing then S performs a  $\phi$ -ing in accordance with rules R with a phenomenal ludic quality.

In the mentioned examples of beauty and humor, the phenomenal quality in question is claimed to arise from positioning a subjective aspect of cognition in the objective role by a process of externalization. It is perhaps not immediately evident that the same is taking place with regard to gaming rules, since these are traditionally conceived as being regulations one voluntarily adhere to and which restrict a subject taking certain actions (Suits 2005) and

which involves voluntarily accepting prescriptions for a chosen sequence of events and a voluntary “valorization” as to their value (Juul 2005).

However, this conception of game rules as voluntarily adopted norms that merely restrict or prescribe actions do not correctly (or fully) describe their actual role during gameplay. A player is not directed at the *rules* themselves, but rather with the *situations and properties* they make possible in the course of gameplay. Thus the rules of chess may serve to define the allowable moves for particular piece, but the desires and beliefs are directed at the property of being a rook, and the way in which it creates a threat or allows possible moves. In order to do that, the primary role of rules can be seen to endow the physical system that is the game with what we might label *agential properties*. In a game setting, properties like being a rook on a chess board or a certain opening move are there to serve as *reasons for action*, since they are endowed with value, designed to be reasoned about and are causes for forming intentions.

These distinctions now put me in a position to formulate the promised proposal about the ludic phenomenal quality, since we now can trace its origin back to a particular feature of cognitive integration that is taking place when these agential properties are externalized as by conforming to the game rules. An action within a game is made possible by the fact that game-rules takes on a normative role similar to rational or ethical norms, because they determine when the agential properties are appropriately instantiated.

It is in this role that we can discern the source of the ludic quality of gameness, because the gaming rules, as opposed to ethical or rational norms, effectively switch the role between conative and cognitive autonomy. A gaming rule is in the immovability position, the basis for which something is supposed to provide a ground for “kicking off” in order to act on a property. But, because the gaming rules are adhered to by an act of *conative* autonomy, the player comes in effect *to be his own ground for action*. Compared to rational norms, he does not simply adhere to the norm; he also voluntarily determines its *content*. The basis for this form of action is very different from actions that proceed from normal rational, ethical or social norms. The social norms base their immovability in intersubjective agreement and the norms of rationality and ethics are presented to us as platonic truths, the content of which is simply given to us, and not for us to determine. The gaming rules, in contrast, are instituted in each act only, and does not have any normative force outside the game.

I believe that this diagnosis accounts for the peculiar phenomenal quality of the gaming action. When an individual performs an in-game  $\phi$ -ing, he has by a voluntary mental act decided to self-legislate the content of the rule, which means that he provides his own grounding, and the peculiar feeling of empowerment and freedom is due to the fact that he is experiencing, not simply the power to initiate his own actions, but his power to decide what the right actions are. For this reason, the actions in games are inherently pleasurable and self-motivating, since being-self determined is indeed an end in itself.

How does this diagnosis of the phenomenal quality and motivational character of game actions fit with the action in computer games? There might seem to be a problem here because computer games have a game mechanics, which acts as a law-like system that a player normally cannot deviate from. Yet, I do not think that this fact essentially changes the situation. Rather this diagnosis contributes to an understanding of what is peculiar to the kind of meaning we find in a computer games. Just like the physical systems created by ordinary game rules, a game mechanics provide a self-sufficient motivational system that do not rely values and goal attainment structures that apply outside the game. The essential role

of the law-like behavior created by algorithms is to serve up externalizations of agential properties that hold only for play in the same way as do ordinary game rules. A game mechanics does not limit the execution of the autonomy the player; it is the means by which it becomes manifested during play.

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