

# On the Aesthetic Relevance of Difficulty in Games

Johan Kalmanlehto

University of Jyväskylä  
johan.d.kalmanlehto@jyu.fi

## Keywords

Difficulty, skill, aesthetics, competence

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper I consider the aesthetic value of difficulty in games by contrasting the difficulty of art and the aesthetic value of mechanical difficulty in games. Whereas both games and art can be difficult in terms of affects, emotions and interpretation, games tend to include also mechanical difficulty in terms of practical goals and unnecessary obstacles. I argue that mechanical difficulty can be aesthetically valuable by requiring from the player know-how, which can be understood as an art of playing. While difficulty and the demand of skill can bring forth exclusive gaming communities, they can also have aesthetic value in terms of developing oneself through cultivation of embodied skills.

Difficulty, art and aesthetics have often been linked together in various theoretical approaches, and art has often been expected to be difficult to distinguish its aesthetic value from mere entertainment. For example, Bertolt Brecht (1964) argued that to make lasting effect, art must work through estrangement, Brecht's continuation of the Russian formalist's concept of defamiliarization, instead of empathetic and cathartic effects. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002) also demanded difficulty from art, claiming that mass culture hinders critical thought to the point of being politically dangerous. Similarly, Clement Greenberg (1961) argued that the function of avantgarde art is to resist the numbing effects of popular culture. This view has long historical roots in the demand of aesthetic autonomy and disinterestedness, such as Immanuel Kant's (2000) aesthetic theory, in which aesthetic experience is detached from practical value.

Whereas the difficulty of art is usually related to emotional, affective and interpretive difficulties, games feature an additional level of mechanical difficulty. Jagoda (2018) has distinguished three levels of difficulty in games: mechanical, interpretive and affective difficulty. Games can have emotionally difficult themes and narrative structures that resist interpretation. For example, games of the *Dark Souls* series are known for their incomprehensible and obscure narratives, which require theory crafting and speculation within gaming communities. Games can also address emotionally difficult topics in their narratives, such as depression and abuse. While such difficulties can be aesthetically valuable as such, and mechanical difficulty can be considered as part of them in terms of ludofictional experience (Terrasa-Torres, 2021),

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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the mechanical difficulty of progressing in a game has its own distinct aesthetic qualities.

Difficult art requires knowledge over aesthetic theories and the history of art, and difficult games demand knowledge of gameplay mechanics, strategies and in some cases the metaplay discussion. However, whereas the competence to appreciate art is more related to cultural capital required to understand aesthetic objects, the competence in gameplay is related more to practical gameplay skills that have been discussed, for example, in terms of gaming capital and ludic habitus (Jačević, 2022; Korkeila & Harviainen, 2023). Although the demand of practical skill can be viewed in conflict with aesthetic contemplation, the experience of striving can itself involve aesthetic experiences of one's own embodied action (Artis, 2021; Nguyen, 2020).

Such skills do not involve only abstract knowledge but embodied and habitual skills, especially in fast-paced games. In ancient Greece art was discussed in terms of *technē*, which meant craft, know-how and practical skill instead of a group of objects like artworks (Shiner, 2014). In this sense, the skill required by mechanical difficulty in games can be considered as *technē*. Instead of relating to the ludofictional meaning of the game, the player's skill as *technē* is an abstract notion that is not necessarily interpreted through the game's fictional aspects but can be considered as an embodied cultivation of the player's aesthetic sensibility (Nannini, 2022).

Such embodied know-how required by mechanical difficulty is not encountered only in games but in many other practices that involve a practical goal, such as crafts, playing a musical instrument, and other activities that are not necessarily goal-oriented but are often engaged in solely for the pleasure gained from activity itself, such as dancing. While bringing about a specific state of affairs, a prelusory goal in Suits' (1978) lexicon, includes an interested attitude, in games such a goal can be detached from any practical value outside the game, resulting in aesthetic experience of one's own agency, which Nguyen (2020) has discussed in terms of "disinterested interestedness".

However, whereas the demand for difficulty in art has been based on its societal function of supporting critical thought, in game cultures the demand for difficulty can foster elitist and exclusive communities, in which novice players, as well as different gamer identities can encounter discrimination (cf. Robinson et al., 2025). Like Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital, also gaming capital can function to distinguish players in terms of adequate skills and ways of playing (e.g., Felczak, 2025). Hence, the disinterested attitude towards the practical skill of gameplay can serve an interested purpose within the social context of gameplay. Viewing difficulty and skill in terms of the art of playing and cultivation of one's embodied sensibilities can provide an interpretation of the aesthetic value of difficulty that focuses more on the subjective experience of self-development than social distinction from others.

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