Conspiracy theories as serious play.

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Abstract: Why do people endorse conspiracy theories? There is no single explanation: different people have different attitudes to the theories they say they believe. In this paper, I argue that for many, conspiracy theories are serious play. They're attracted to conspiracy theories because these theories are engaging: it's fun to entertain them (witness the enormous number of conspiracy narratives in film and TV). Just as the person who watches a conspiratorial film suspends disbelief for its duration, so many conspiracy theories do not believe the theories they endorse; rather, they suspend disbelief in them. I argue that the serious play hypothesis explains some characteristic features of conspiracy theories, such as their gamification and the kind of relationship they have to evidence.

Conspiracy theories – at least, those theories that are most prone to being called 'conspiracy theories' – often have a bizarre content.[1] Large numbers of people claim to believe theories according to which the COVID-19 pandemic was planned by governments, to make populations docile or to bring them to accept being injected with a microchip, or that senior Democrats are involved in ritual child sex abuse and cannibalism, or that Barack Obama is the anti-Christ. In the face of the sheer incredibility of such theories, we may doubt whether they are sincere. Perhaps they are trolling (Lopez and Hillygus, 2018), or engaging in signaling (Funkhouser, 2017; Ganapini, 2021; Mercier, 2020), or in expressive responding (Hannon, 2021; Levy and Ross, 2021; Schaffner and Luks, 2018). Perhaps very few people are really so gullible as to accept such incredible theories.

There's little doubt that some of the people who espouse these theories are simply insincere. Incentives decrease the proportion of people who report incredible beliefs (Bullock and Lenz, 2019), and many of those who claim to be sincere do not seem very motivated to act on these beliefs (Mercier, 2020): both these facts call their sincerity into doubt. However, many people pass both tests of sincerity: they do not respond to financial incentives by changing their reported beliefs, and they are sufficiently motivated by them to engage in *some* consequential behavior (for example, rioting at the US Capitol). Are these people sincere believers? No doubt many of them are. In addition to such sincere believers, however, I will suggest that a significant number of people are neither sincere believers, nor insincere in their reports. They're not trolling or signaling: they're reporting what they take themselves to believe. But they don't – quite – believe

what they report. Instead, they're immersed without realizing it in an imaginative game, in which they suspend disbelief in the theory. We're all apt to play conspiracy theory on occasion. What distinguishes those who report belief from those who do not is that *we* are aware we're playing, and *they* are not. They're engaged in *serious play*.[2]

I.

Conspiracy theories are *fun*. They're entertaining; hence the fact that many films and TV shows feature them. Besides the many obvious candidates – *The X-Files*, *Capricorn One*, *The Bourne Identity* and its sequels, *JFK*, *The Americans*, *The Truman Show*, *Homeland* – there are also the many films and TV shows about local conspiracies: criminal conspiracies or conspiracies to hide police corruption: *Serpico*, *L.A Confidential*, *The Departed*, at least one season of *Fargo*, *Line of Duty* and many, many others.

Why are do conspiracy theories feature so prominently in fiction? One reason is, of course, that such theories are salient to us: from anxieties over communist agents to contemporary fears over fake news, we worry that conspirators are influencing important events. As Michael Butter (2020) notes, however, their prevalence in fiction probably owes a lot to their potential for dramatization. Plotting makes for good plots, and conspiracy theories are central to so many fictions because we enjoy them. They make good plots for several reasons. One reason concerns the way in which they pit the underdog against powerful forces (Fenster, 1999). We enjoy seeing powerful but malevolent forces getting their comeuppance, and the apparent hopelessness of the struggle by the underdog makes their final triumph all the sweeter. But we also enjoy conspiratorial narratives for their own sake. We enjoy the ingenuity with which they knit together and explain apparently disparate and unrelated facts together. We enjoy solving puzzles and we enjoy clever solutions to puzzles, and conspiracy theories give us the opportunity to take delight in both.

We also find the idea of massive cover ups intriguing. We like playing with the idea that, somehow, mundane reality is not so mundane, because it has been carefully constructed to hide what's *really* going on. Why we enjoy this idea isn't clear. Perhaps it's because it imbues the everyday with a touch of magic and mystery, making it special and us – we who pull back the curtain – the chosen ones (think of *The Matrix*). Whatever the reason, conspiracy theories overlap with a variety of paranormal theories, and those who enjoy or take seriously theories of one kind are likely to enjoy or take seriously theories of the other kind. *The X-Files* moved seamlessly between government cover ups and episodes about cryptids and paranormal phenomena. From *Rosemary's Baby* to *Midsommar*, movies about the occult have often

featured conspiracies, and there are a number of books and movies that feature governments who are aware of, but concealing, the reality of magic (Charles Stross's *Atrocity Archives* series focuses on a government agency dedicated to fighting powerful dark forces; Ben Aaronovitch's Peter Grant series focuses on a branch of the British police that uses magic; even the *Harry Potter* books and movies mention that the 'muggle' prime minister is aware of the wizarding world). We love the idea that the mundane is infused by magic.

You don't have to be a believer to be entertained by conspiracy theories. Most of us enjoy the opportunity to suspend disbelief for a couple of hours, and live vicariously in a world in which conspiracy theories are real. Some of us read conspiratorial books that purport to be non-fiction for entertainment, or watch purported documentaries on the History Network about 'ancient aliens'. Erich Von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* book was a best-seller and Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* features a Knights Templar secret history. UFO specials crowd out real history on the History Channel, presumably because they attract bigger audiences. Conspiracy theories are, for many of us, *play*.

For many people conspiracy theories are *serious* play. Serious players consume conspiracy theories for the same reason as the rest of us: because they're fun. Serious players are distinguished from the rest of us by the fact they *endorse* some of the theories they entertain, despite the fact that these theories are not grounded in evidence that they would find sufficient were they not playing. Serious players *take themselves* to believe some of these conspiracy theories. They don't quite believe them, but they don't quite disbelieve them either. They're suspended between belief and disbelief, because they're immersed in the game.

II.

Why should we believe that the serious play hypothesis is true of many of those who endorse conspiracy theories? A principal reason is that the hypothesis makes sense of some otherwise puzzling features of actual conspiracy theories. An ironic detachment characterizes a great many fictional representations of conspiracy theories: the audience is invited at once to enjoy the conspiracy and the attempts to uncover it, but at the same time to wonder whether there is a conspiracy at all, or whether the truth-seekers are suffering from paranoia (see Butter, 2020 for discussion). Contemporary conspiracy theories, too, hover between serious assertion and ironic detachment. On 4chan and Telegram, memes and in jokes are at least as common as arguments among those who say they accept conspiracy theories. The January 6 rioters, animated by the QAnon conspiracy theory, invaded the Capitol Building wearing carnival masks and face paint,

as well as the now notorious horned helmets and animal skins (Friedman, 2021). Conspiracy theories are promulgated and shared "for the lulz," (Kunzru, 2020), and not only by those who don't endorse them.

The evidence just mentioned is difficult to interpret and difficult to gather systematically, so we shouldn't put a great deal of weight on it. It offers only weak support for the serious play hypothesis. There is, however, more direct evidence.

A number of people have noted how gamified QAnon is, with its recurrent cryptic "drops" by Q. Drops sometimes included strings of apparent code, around which a community of people gathered to share their interpretations (Berkowitz, 2021; Thompson, 2020; Zadrozny and Collins, 2018). QAnon is the wordl of conspiracy theories. Q's drops often explicitly invoked games: "shall we play a game once more?" "This is not a game. Learn to play the game." Despite the (equivocal) denials, QAnon *is* a game, at least in part: there's no rationale for the use of codes and ciphers other than as props in a game. There's no reason why Q should not say what they mean plainly, except to provide followers with a puzzle to solve together. But while QAnon may be gamified to a greater extent than usual, gamification is a *typical* feature of bizarre conspiracy theories.

What's unique about QAnon is the alleged existence of an inside source, Q, who provided an ongoing series of clues. QAnon was a game with a single gamemaster and perhaps this structure helps explain its extraordinary success. With other conspiracy theories, the role of gamemaster is instead distributed across all the active contributors. Not only is the game open to any player – anyone can login to 4chan, Reddit or one of the many Facebook groups that (prior to a crackdown) were dedicated to Pizzagate and other conspiracies – but anyone can also attempt to occupy the role of gamemaster. If QAnon is the Wordl of conspiracy theories, more standard conspiracies theories are massively multiplayer online role-playing games in which every player can attempt to shape the common ground and even the rules of the game. Anyone may offer a new interpretation of the cryptic clues already in the common ground, and try to fit events and people into the evolving narrative (is that news anchor winking? Is she hinting that the report she's introducing is spurious? Is that a clue?) Anyone may offer new clues, or attempt to take the narrative off in a new direction. Unlike Q, the player will almost certainly need to find these clues in the wild and then bid to introduce them into the game (Look at this footage of Biden; isn't that an earpiece? What's that bulge in his jacket?) Anyone may find clues and attempt to introduce them into play (of course, many bid go unheeded). QAnon is not uniquely gamified; it is unusual only in the centralization of the role of the gamemaster.

As these remarks already suggest, thinking of conspiracy theory generation and refinement as a game also makes sense of the (supposed) evidence cited in their favor. While conspiracy theorists often cite evidence that offers some genuine support for their theory (and some offer only such evidence), it is also common to cite all kinds of coincidences, shadows and fantasies. For example, when a minor actor who had claimed that Hollywood stars were engaged in pedophilia was found dead, QAnon supporters maintained he'd been murdered by Tom Hanks, one of the actors he'd accused. The evidence: Hanks had tweeted about roadkill. And the clincher was that the tweet had been posted 42 days before the actor had died at the age of 42. (Weill, 2022: 161-2).

The citation of this kind of evidence is by no means rare. There are multiple examples surround COVID-19. For example, some of those who claimed that it was an engineered bioweapon claimed that its name meant "see a sheep surrender" (Reuters staff, 2020a), on the grounds that *ovid* means "sheep" in Latin (it doesn't) and 19 was the number "in ancient times". Multiple people, some high profile, noted that "media control" is an anagram of "delta omicron" (Plummer, 2021) and that "omicron" is an anagram of "moronic" (O'Rourke, 2021). They turned to pop culture for further support: thousands of social media accounts cited the film *I Am Legend* as the 'playbook' for COVID-19 (Sardarizadeh, 2021). Others cited the 2011 film *Captain America* as evidence that the pandemic was planned, citing a still in which the hero stands in Times Square, with a billboard advertising Corona beer and another with an image (actually showing pasta) that might be taken to be an electron microscope image of the virus (Reuters staff, 2020b). The citation of coincidences of all sorts as evidence of either conspiracy or of paranormal phenomena is routine; a well-known example concerns the apparently numerous coincidences surrounding the Lincoln and Kennedy assassination (Mikkelson, 1999).

Several researchers have argued that belief in insufficiently grounded conspiracy theories reflects, in part, a disposition to place too much weight on coincidences and patterns (van Prooijen et al., 2018). While a disposition to see coincidences as significant may indeed play a role in conspiratorial belief, it also plays a role in serious play. The fact that these coincidences and word games seem to offer kind of support for the conspiracy, albeit of a kind that owes more to association than to logic, makes the game more fun. It's *satisfying* to find ingenious ways to support the conspiracy or to invent a new one (Blattberg, 2021). A modicum of interpretive charity should lead us to prefer the hypothesis that people are engaged in some kind of game when they cite evidence like this over the alternative according to which otherwise broadly rational people seriously cite a Hollywood film as evidence of a supposedly deep plot. What's

more plausible: that hundreds of thousands of people would think that the deep state or a shadowy cabal of the superrich are manipulating the world *and* also compulsively dropping clues to what they're doing in plain sight, or that many of the people around us are not playing what Van Leeuwen (2017) calls *the evidence game* when they cite such material? Much of this theorizing makes much more sense as a game than as the serious pursuit of truth.

III

Mention of Van Leeuwen should spur us to compare the serious play hypothesis to his theory of religious credences. According to Van Leeuwen, very many religious people don't take the belief attitude to the central claims of their religion (Van Leeuwen, 2018, 2014). His primary evidence for this claim is that religious credences seem to lack two features of genuine beliefs. They lack *cognitive governance* (they engage inferentially with only some relevant propositional attitudes), and they lack evidential vulnerability (they are not extinguished by strong evidence against them). More importantly for our purposes, Van Leeuwen takes religious believers to be engaged in something very like pretend play. Van Leeuwen develops his account using Kendall Walton's theory of make believe.

For Walton (1990), make believe is a game in which rules prescribe that on the basis of certain inputs, one imagines certain propositions. *Props* for imagining play a central role in governing the inputs. If one is playing "jungle," rugs might be patches of quicksand; that is, the rules of generation might prescribe that rugs are to be avoided, or if one is unfortunate enough to step on one, one needs rescuing with a rope or branch (or whatever prop is standing in for them). Make believe prescribe principles of generation, which are functions from perceptions of props to imaginings. But the child engaged in imagining keeps track of reality. She won't panic if she steps on a rug. In fact (even) children rarely show any confusion about the difference between pretense and reality (Weisberg, 2013). The difference between the child who pretends to feed a cookie to her doll but eats the cookie herself and the religious 'believer' who sacrifices food to the gods or ancestors but eats it themselves is that the former is willing to acknowledge that they're engaged in pretense, Van Leeuwen suggests. The latter won't acknowledge it even to themselves.

The serious play hypothesis might be seen as the transposition or extension of Van Leeuwen's theory of religious credences to conspiracy theories. Social media posts and Breitbart stories are props for the conspiracy theorist, on the basis of which he imagines certain states of affairs to obtain in the world (Walton is, of course, explicit that texts can be props for make believe; indeed, his primary aim is to develop a theory for the simulation of worlds that arises from

engagement with texts and with art objects). The conspiracy theorist is engaged in pretense, imagining the world to be a certain way according to the principles of generation provided by Facebook posts.

The similarities between Van Leeuwen's work and the serious play hypothesis are genuine and significant. But there are important differences, and it is instructive to work through these differences. Not only will it allow us to clarify the serious play hypothesis, it will also provide the opportunity to show why serious players may endorse the content of the theories they're, nevertheless, playing with.

The *play* element of 'serious play' is meant literally. Many people engage with conspiracy theories because they're fun. When Van Leeuwen uses the term "game" to describe some of the activities of religious believers (and, for that matter, non-believers playing what he calls "the evidence game"), he uses it in a sense more attuned to Wittgenstein than to folk usage; games of religious enactment are games more akin to Wittgensteinian language games than to playful activity. This is not just a difference between his theory and mine; it reflects a difference in the explananda. *Some* religious activity *is* genuinely playful: think of the tradition of some Eastern Orthodox communities of racing for a cross thrown into a lake, river or the sea. And lots of religious activity is supported by texts, spoken or written, with a satisfying narrative structure. But a great deal of religious activity is not playful at all.[3] Indeed, much of it involves very little in the way of make believe. Sitting through the sermons and chanting of the standard Jewish or Anglican service is neither game-like, nor does it involve props governed by principles of generation.

These two properties – encouraging or tolerating playfulness and involving make-believe – are both necessary for games, in the sense in which I'm using the term here. Much religious engagement involves neither. Perhaps this could be the basis of an objection to Van Leeuwen, if he requires that paradigm religious activity involve at least one of these properties. Cognitive scientist of religion have noted that some religions are characterized by high-frequency low arousal rituals, like the regular services characteristic of most forms of Christianity (e.g., Whitehouse and Kavanagh, 2022). Such low arousal rituals, which make up by far the majority of the formal religious activity in these religions, are neither playful nor do they involve much make-believe. On this basis, we might argue that Van Leeuwen's theory has a much narrower scope than he allows: perhaps it applies only to the religious credences of those whose faith is sustained by high-arousal rituals, with an abundance of props. Such religions have fewer adherents, today at any rate, than those characterized by low-arousal rituals. While there are probably some elements of play and make believe even in the religions to which most of the

faithful belong today, they concern details of the religion (*this is the body of Christ*; *Noah built an ark for all the animals in the world*) and not the big picture (*God exists and is benevolent).*

My primary concern here is not to criticise Van Leeuwen's view but to distinguish it from the serious play view. If Van Leeuwen can defend his view against the objection just considered on the basis that a sufficient number of religions are sufficiently game-like in sufficiently central respects, in some extended (more Wittgensteinian) sense, *and* that that sense is all he needs for his purposes, so be it. The 'play' in 'serious play' is meant more literally. A central motivation of engaging with conspiracy theories, for serious players (and for many people who never come to take themselves to believe conspiracy theories) is that they're fun. In contrast, fun plays a relatively small role in most of the major religions, for most adherents.

A more serious worry for Van Leeuwen arises in explaining why religious believers appear to make a mistake that children never do: they fail to recognize that they're engaged in imaginative play. The serious play hypothesis appears to confront the same issue: both religious believers and serious players are sincere but mistaken in reporting their beliefs. But the serious play hypothesis has much more in the way of resources to explain *why* people might come to mistake their ludic engagement with a theory for belief in its content.

One reason children rarely confuse imagination with reality is that children's pretend play involves imaginative scenarios that are usually very *easy* to distinguish from reality. Think back to the *rug=quicksand* example. A rug is a pretty good prop for quicksand, especially if it happens to be the right color. It occupies an area of the floor that could correspond to a patch of quicksand; it's flat and at the right level. But it's very far from a perfect simulacrum. It has an unfortunate habit of supporting my weight, it has distressingly clear boundaries and its texture is all wrong (of course, some of the features that make it less than ideal as a model for quicksand also make it much more suitable for play; real quicksand is, presumably, not a lot of fun). These differences between props and the imaginings they dictate play a central role in ensuring that pretense is kept distinct from reality. When the 'cookie' is made from playdough, it tastes like playdough and the temptation to eat it is kept in check. The world pushes back against the pretense, and imaginative immersion fails to become belief.[4]

Van Leeuwen's examples of props for religious enactment tend to have this same recalcitrance to immersion. The person receiving communion takes a wafer that lacks the taste and texture of flesh. The ancestors stubbornly refuse to eat the meat offered to them. The coffee offered by the Vineyard member to God remains unconsumed; the chair unoccupied (see Luhrmann, 2012 for

the latter two examples). But the props for conspiracy theorists are not recalcitrant in this way. They offer no resistance at all, because the conspiratorial narrative is designed to explain the observed facts. Biden is in office because the election was stolen; and the world offers reminders that Biden *is* in office. The mainstream media lies to cover up official misdeeds, and the mainstream media indeed fails to mention these official misdeeds. The props for conspiracy theories are consistent with the background reality. Since they offer conspiratorial explanations, they predict that all the evidence that is easily available will seem to show that the conspiracy is false. In short, the conspiracy predicts that all the evidence that might be relied on to help me distinguish fantasy from reality is exactly as it is, and cannot therefore play that role.[5]

Further, those immersed in pretense are often assisted, more or less impatiently, to snap out of it. The child's father tells her to put down the truck and come eat; the partner of a particularly immersed method actor tells her to snap out of it. The person engaged in serious play may be pushed further into, rather than out of, pretense by the people around them. Social media groups that share memes and decipher clues about 'what's really going on' may contain few or no people who really believe the content of the conspiratorial explanations they elaborate; nevertheless, they keep one another teetering on the edge of belief. Conspiracy theories are typically socially sustained: even if my family doesn't share my (apparent) belief that COVID-19 is a hoax (and often they do, of course) my online community helps me sustain it.

Paranormal theories, which I've suggested are also often sustained through serious play, don't always have these features but they often do. They're often conspiratorial: think of stories that the US is hiding alien technology. Even when they're not, there's usual little salient evidence available to allow people to easily keep track of reality. Whether or not the ancient astronauts theory is true doesn't make any difference to the evidence I expect to get in the course of my day. The failure of people around me to spontaneously combust isn't much evidence against the hypothesis that they on very rare occasions that's exactly what they do. If I entertain these ideas – or the reality of the yeti, Big Foot, of vampires, werewolves or witches – I can't expect to rely on salient evidence to ensure that I don't confuse fantasy with reality.

Whether playful engagement with conspiracy theories and the like is a risk for me depends, inter alia, on whether I am surrounded by prompts that will keep me grounded in reality. One risk factor is low trust in mainstream sources. Most of those who enjoyed the conspiratorial theorizing on display in Oliver Stone's *JFK* didn't go on to endorse the theory the film suggests; an important part of the explanation for this fact is that most of the audience trusted reliable sources of evidence. Audience members may (for example) have encountered the media criticisms of

Stone's film and the resulting controversy over whether it was appropriate for a film maker to play fast and loose with the historical facts on such a politically charged issue. The controversy would remind them of the accepted truth about the assassination if they didn't recall it on their own. But many people do *not* trust mainstream media, and low-trust individuals are far more likely to accept (or, at any rate, endorse) conspiracy theories (Bruder and Kunert, 2022; Douglas et al., 2019). Those with low trust in the mainstream media are not given reminders of the gap between reality and pretense, either because they avoid such media or because they don't see it as a source of genuine evidence. Reality doesn't push back against serious play for those who don't consult or who don't trust reliable sources.

Van Leeuwen's religious believers and my serious players both confuse imagining for reality. In both case, their imaginings may receive social support from those around them. But to the extent to which religion involves Walton-style imagining, with props governing their contents, the religious believer is subject to pushback that the serious player avoids. It's at least somewhat mysterious why this pushback from reality isn't more effective in bringing them to see that they're engaged in imaginative play.

IV

In this final substantive section, I will compare the serious play hypothesis to Nguyen's (2022) recent defence of playfulness as an epistemic virtue. Where I see playfulness as a route to the endorsement of conspiracy theories, he sees it as protective against them. As we'll see, our views are not inconsistent. However, I'll suggest that the risks of playfulness are greater, and the potential rewards smaller, than Nguyen recognizes.

Playfulness, according to Nguyen, consists in the disposition to engage in activities for their own sake; for the sheer joy of it. Playfulness is *autotelic*: while it might bring with it all sorts of goods (fitness, companionship, and so on), it is not engaged in for the sake of these ends, but for itself. Intellectual playfulness, accordingly, is the disposition to engage in intellectual play. It involves *perspective shifting*: "trying on and (at least temporarily) inhabiting alternate belief systems," including adopting their norms for belief-acquisition (277). Nguyen argues that intellectual playfulness is an epistemic virtue: a disposition which we have reason to cultivate for the epistemic benefits it brings us.

Intellectual playfulness is epistemically valuable because it is an invaluable remedy against *epistemic traps*. An epistemic trap is a belief system that is "rigged up to block defection" (270). Echo chambers, as analysed by Nguyen (2020) himself, provides a good example.[6] On his

account, an echo chamber is an epistemic trap because evidence against the claims echoed in it is systematically pre-empted (to use the terminology introduced in Begby (2020)): echo chamber denizens are led to expect that very evidence, or something like it, and to reject it on the grounds that it or its source is untrustworthy. An echo chamber is an epistemic trap because the kind of evidence we'd need to climb out of one is taken to be unreliable or even to testify to its truth. An echo chamber redirects intellectual inquiry; other epistemic traps discourage it (for example, by encouraging unthinking deference to a leader, or intellectual apathy).

Nguyen suggests that intellectual playfulness is one of the few resources we have to escape epistemic traps. Crucially, intellectual playfulness isn't concerned with plausibility. We may play with ideas without taking them at all seriously as candidates for truth. Accordingly, I may playfully engage with a system of belief even though when I engage with it evidentially, its claims are preempted for me or otherwise seen as unreliable. Playfulness may enable me to escape an epistemic trap when serious intellectual engagement with a rival belief would not, *because* its unconcerned with plausibility. More generally, intellectual playfulness may enable me to surmount local maxima. It might be the case that there's no rational, evidence-based, way for me to improve my epistemic position: I've climbed the epistemic landscape to the local peak, such that crossing to another, higher, epistemic peak would require me to traverse a valley; that is, to accept claims or ways of thinking that are epistemically inferior (and not only by my lights). Epistemic playfulness might enable me to leap across the chasm between my peak and another, higher, peak, *because* it's not concerned with plausibility.

This is an intriguing idea. I want to suggest, however, there's a lot less to it than Nguyen thinks. There are two main reasons why I'm sceptical that intellectual playfulness has much to offer in the way of epistemic benefits for those caught in epistemic traps. If I'm right about that, and if engagement with conspiracy theories is often an instance of intellectual playfulness (as it seems to be and as I'll argue shortly) which can lead to endorsement, then the dangers are probably considerably greater than the benefits.

The person engaged in serious play with a conspiracy theory is in an epistemic trap. As we've seen, such play is unusual among imaginative exercises because conspiracy theories predict all the evidence the player is likely to receive: they predict that reality is just as it is, and thereby make it easier to mistake playful engagement for genuine belief. Conspiracy theories preempt the evidence that keeps us grounded. Playful engagement with a conspiracy theory is not a doxastic trap, like finding oneself in an echo chamber (as Nguyen imagines them), but it's an

epistemic trap nevertheless. Might the conspiracy theorist play herself out of serious play, just as she played herself in?

It's not clear that as it stands Nguyen's argument applies directly to the serious player, because it's not clear that the serious player accepts a belief system which rivals better belief systems, such that she could cosplay these rivals. It depends on what 'belief system' means. On one view, the differences between her beliefs and better beliefs are too small and shallow to count as rival belief system (we want to allow for conflicting beliefs within one and the same system, on pain of trivializing the notion of 'belief system'.) Rather than attempt to judge whether the differences amount to differences in system, I'm going to consider both kinds of cases.

Let's start with creationism as compared to an evolutionary account of life. It's plausible that these rival accounts constitute genuinely different belief systems: the person who accepts evolution enters into a new way of thinking about biological phenomena. Understanding behaviors and other features of the phenotype as adaptations is a dramatic change in one's web of beliefs. It alters how we understand the natural world. It also requires us to come to grips with deep time; the time required for tiny alterations in phenotype to result in speciation. Evolutionary understanding also entails a grasp of population dynamics, and frequency dependent selection, which again has a dramatic effect on how we see the biological world.

I have glimpsed these transformative effects. It took hard work: I immersed myself in evolutionary theory for an extended period of time. Coming to understand it, to the degree I managed it, required acquisition of some of the technical apparatus, especially (very basic) game theory. I only glimpsed the richness of the world view that was slowly revealed to me: I couldn't go further, in part because more serious engagement requires formal skills I lack. My partial success and my failure to go further both illustrate some of the limitations of intellectual playfulness as a means to escape an epistemic trap.

As a matter of fact, when I began to learn evolutionary theory I was engaged in a truth-seeking exercise. I wanted to better understand something I already took to be true. Suppose, instead, I was a creationist cosplaying the evolution game. I might try substituting "evolution" for "God" in my web of beliefs about the origins and development of life and try to trace out the ramifications. Should I now feel gratitude to evolution for the glories of the natural world? How should my attitude to God (I may remain a theist, after all) change? I don't think there are unique answers to these questions; rather there is a range of reasonable answers. I might try to explore some of

them in my play. What I *won't* do is come to understand the rival belief system; not by being playful.

The creationist has some intuitive grip on the biological world via their view. They understand to some degree what it would be like for God to create life, on the basis of the analogies between the creationist story and how ordinary agents create things. Substituting 'evolution' for 'God' playfully entails a loss of that intuitive understanding. How does a blind force (or a name that refers to a range of forces) create? Playing "evolution" entails the loss of whatever understanding the person took themselves to possess. They can't come to appreciate the explanatory advantages of the evolutionary story over the creationist account, because there's no way to play oneself into possessing the suite of conceptual tools that evolutionary theory requires. It's sheer loss of understanding for the player.

Nor is there any serious prospect of the creationist playing themselves into understanding by playing "game theory," "reciprocal altruism", and the like. The reason is that despite it's name, game theory is not much fun. For me at any rate, learning game theory felt like work, not play. Reading about coefficients of relatedness and frequency dependent selection was more rewarding, but I wouldn't describe it as *fun*. Satisfying, perhaps, but not fun. I'm unlikely to invest the serious effort required so long as I'm being playful. Intellectual playfulness won't allow me to escape the local maximum I've reached epistemically by leaping to another, high, epistemic peak because there's a funness valley (rather than, or as well as, an epistemic valley) to transverse when making the leap. Theists sometimes describe a world without God as a world without anything truly awe-inspiring. That seems to me to be false, but it takes *work* to see what is awe-inspiring about the world understood in terms of evolution (not to mention cosmology).[7] It takes work that entails the tolerance of frustration and of long periods of incomprehension (I report), not fun.[8] In contrast, much of the engagement we see with science around us – reading reports of some cool study in the paper, for example – is fun, but it doesn't allow us to see the world through the perspective of the relevant science. In the words of the cartoon, you may think you love science, but really you're just looking at its butt as it walks by.[9]

There's little reason, then, to think that cosplaying evolution will allow the creationist to come to see the ways in which the evolutionary perspective illuminates biological phenomena, and therefore little reason to think that such cosplaying will allow her to traverse the valley between her local epistemic peak and the higher slopes of such a perspective. If this case is a good model for escaping serious play, then Nguyen's prescription seems misplaced in this context. Perhaps, however, it is not a good model. One reason to suspect it's not is that the conversion from a

conspiratorial worldview to a less conspiratorial one may fall well short of adoption of a new belief system. Conspiratorial beliefs are usually quite circumscribed, and background beliefs remain fixed between the two worldviews. If they *are* genuinely different systems, then I doubt cosplay is going to get the person from the first to the other, because there's too much hard work and too little real fun, getting from the first to the second. I don't think the person who cosplays "lamestream world" is more likely to succeed in playing themselves out of a conspiracy theory. It may not be hard work to play "lamestream", but there's a marked funness asymmetry between "conspiracy theory" and it.

There's a reason why the cinemas aren't full of films asking whether important historical events mightn't have occurred as a result of lots of people acting out of some mix of self-interest, altruism and utter confusion, plus a huge dollop of sheer chance. No one wrote a bestselling book about the house in which the groans and bumps in the night were caused by squirrels. The mundane is, well, mundane. It's boring, or so we think. We understand it, we think, and in any case a fuller explanation were we to grasp it would be both hard (all that math!) and banal. We – who reject paranormal and conspiratorial theories – nevertheless enjoy entertainments that turn on such accounts, but the true believer and the serious player probably gets very little enjoyment from entertaining *It turns out the Earth is round* or *When Biden won the election fairly.*

There's a second basis for an asymmetry between the mundane and the conspiratorial. In her commentary on Nguyen's chapter, Lani Watson notes that there's a "palatability constraint" on what we enjoy imagining (Watson, 2022). We want to see the bad guys get their comeuppance, not adopt their perspective. Of course, there are complicated ways in which we might identify with the villain of a piece (think Walter White), but it takes skilful storytelling and nuance to bring it about. Typically, we'll be brought to identify with the villain when they're first the victim. When epistemic traps are moralized, and they usually are, we're going to have a hard time identifying with those who are outside it. Their evidence is preempted, after all, because they're *bad* or *incompetent*; not the kind of people we'd enjoy simulating.

In fact, I think we confront more than a palatability constraint on imagining what it's like to be in their shoes: to the extent we see them as immoral we face the problem of *imaginative resistance* (Gendler, 2000; Levy, 2005). Even in the hands of skilful storytellers, we can't be led to imagine that the Nazis were really basically decent people.[10] At minimum, we're going to find such simulation aversive and we're unlikely to engage in it playfully. The work we'd need to do to

make ourselves imagine the Nazis as good may be beyond even the skills of Vince Gillian; in any case, it is *work*. These are significant obstacles in the way of playing one's way out of an epistemic trap.

I don't say it can't be done. Rather, my claim is that the asymmetry between the enchanted worldview of the serious player and the mundane worldview of the rest of us makes it very significantly harder to play one than the other: the basin of attraction for one is far greater than the other. We should expect good stories to have a significant edge in cultural epidemiology and in intellectual playfulness: widespread conspiracy theories are entered into, in part, because they're good stories and we rarely can play ourselves out of them. This is especially likely to be true for the kind of person most likely to have played themselves into a conspiracy theory. They're unlikely to be find a huge amount of pleasure in stretching the limits of their conceptual repertoire. For them, the funness asymmetry is especially stark.

It's worth noting that even if the person in the epistemic trap succeeds in simulating the mundane, she has no apparent reason to prefer it to her enchanted worldview. What's in it for her? A loss of joy is not an incentive that moves many. Its epistemic benefits won't be apparent to her, especially since conspiracy theories are designed to explain all the apparent facts (and then some: anomaly chasing is the essence of many theories). It's the wrong place to look and the wrong lever to pull. She needs to trust better, not to compare theories. That's what *we* do.

Conclusion

Should we be intellectually playful? Well, I certainly don't want to be the fun police. I enjoy horror movies and I can see the attractions of conspiracy theories. Fun is intrinsically rewarding and should be an element in life. For most of us, it's a reasonably safe escape for a few hours and I'm not going to stop indulging any time soon. Nor, however, am I going to see it as virtuous. On the contrary, even for us – even for me – it's somewhat epistemically risky. It may have its potential epistemic benefits, but those benefits are smaller and less likely than the dangers.

The playful but serious endorsement of conspiracy theories is epistemically harmful, even though the serious player doesn't believe what she takes herself to believe. Because she takes herself to believe it, she's disposed to endorse it, and widespread endorsement has a variety of harmful effects. For instance, widespread endorsement of a conspiracy theory will be captured by surveys of beliefs, and breathlessly reported in the media, leading to the perception that a large chunk of our fellow citizens are deluded and irrational and increasing affective polarization (that is, the disposition to think badly of those we disagree with; affective polarization, unlike attitude

polarization, has increased over recent decades (Hannon, 2021)). Widespread endorsement of such theories contributes to providing a demand for rationalizations for them (Williams, 2022), with corrosive effects on the epistemic environment. It also leads the person who takes themselves to believe the theory to engage in further epistemic action – attending to unreliable sources, for example – which can have further effects on her attitudes, including her genuine beliefs. Finally, her endorsements play some (though not all) the functional roles of beliefs. Obviously, they drive assertion, but they also drive some further behavior – perhaps voting, campaigning and proselytizing, for instance.

Intellectual playfulness is dangerous because it's a way into a sort of epistemic trap that Nguyen hasn't identified: not belief (let alone a belief *system*) but endorsement taken for belief (it may well be a route into belief too).[11] Because the world doesn't push back against those theories with widest circulation, from QAnon to Nessie, the person who entertains them cannot rely on the world around them to keep them from confusing play with belief. It's much less risky for those who can rely on the *social* world – pushback and better views from those we trust – to jolt us back into reality. Even for us, there are risks; if we go beyond the imaginative simulation and into the realm of LARPing, we risk losing our social reference points and replacing them with those that will reinforce conspiracy or paranormal belief. Play, but mind the quicksand![12]

NOTES

[1] Some philosophers object to the term 'conspiracy theory' because it can be weaponized: describing something as a conspiracy theory serves to paint it as ludicrous (Coady, 2012; Pigden, 2017). They argue that since conspiracies against the public interest do occur, and it is important to uncover them, we should avoid such stigmatizing language. It's notable, however, that we tend to reserve the label 'conspiracy theory' for theories that are plainly unjustified: it's a normative term, such that to describe something as a conspiracy theory is to make a claim about its epistemic status. Here, in any case, 'conspiracy theory' is used stipulatively, to refer to theories that have a bizarre content. The scope of the hypothesis explored here ranges over such theories and other bizarre beliefs that do not involve conspiracies.

[2] To my knowledge, only three writers have previously noted the ludic element in engagement with conspiracies: Sobo (2019), Haramabam (2021) and Blattberg (2021). All call for greater attention to the fun of conspiracy theorizing in our own theoretical work.

[3] Nguyen (2022) argues that playfulness requires the adoption of an attitude toward the rules that is midway between the mocking engagement of the ironist and the all-too-serious engagement of the dogmatist who insists on them. In his terms, religious games usually involve the dogmatic attitude to the constitutive rules of the religious game.

[4] Schellenberg (2013) has argued for what she calls *the continuum thesis*, according to which imagination is continuous with belief. She argues that the continuum thesis is needed to explain the phenomenon of imaginative immersion. Few people have accepted her claim. Liao and Doggett (2014) argue that immersed imagining is better explained by an alteration in the content imagined, rather than an alteration in the nature of the state. More recently, Kampa (2018) and Chasid (2021) have often competing theories of immersion that reject the continuum thesis. Kampa (to some degree building on Liao and Doggett) explains immersion in terms of attention, while Chasid explains it in terms of failing to be conscious of the rules of generation. I don't intend to try to adjudicate between these accounts. What matters for me is that on *all* of them, pretenders exit immersion relatively easily and if sincere will readily acknowledge that their imaginings are inconsistent with their settled beliefs.

[5] Conspiracy theories are often said to be self-sealing, because all the evidence that could be adduced against them is taken to be consistent with them (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). That quality is sometimes said to show that these theories are irrational. I am not taking a stand on this question, or indeed on whether conspiracy theories are self-

sealing. My point is narrower: that the kind of cues that we routinely rely on to distinguish fantasy and reality are far harder to access when we're fantasing that a conspiracy theory is true.

[6] Elsewhere, I've taken issue with Nguyen's account of echo chambers (Levy, 2021)

[7] While I don't know enough about theistic perspectives to be sure, I sometimes suspect that many of those who think that science strips the world of its awesomeness themselves don't have perspectives that warrant (or, perhaps, cause in them) awe. They have shallow theisms, in which God is a big man in the sky. Many theistic perspectives may underwrite a perception of the world as awesome but it takes work to get to grips with such perspectives in a way that warrantx a feeling of awe, and many theists haven't done this work. I'm not suggesting that atheists are typically better off in this regard, of course.

[8] Here might be a good place to record a debt of gratitude to Greg Restall for helping me through a period of incomprehension of basic game theory.

[9] https://explosm.net/comics/kris-same

[10] It's worth noting that imaginative resistance occurs with regard to non-moralized concepts as well as moral ones: we won't go along with the author when she stipulates that all the cubes had three sides, for example. That being the case, we may have a hard time engaging in playful simulation of perspectives that are not moralized to the extent they postulate alterations in reality we can't accept.

[11] I haven't said anything about the kind of mental state that underlies an endorsement that's taken for a belief. There's a rich set of options to choose from: a number of philosophers have identified cases in which agents sincerely avow that *p* but don't (fully) believe that *p* (see, for example, Frankish 2004; Funkhouser, 2005; Gendler, 2007). There are significant differences between these views and I can't yet commit myself to any of them. I leave that for future work; here I simply point to my companions in crime.

[12] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Social Minds in Digital Spaces conference at the University of Arkansas. I am grateful to a wonderful group of philosophers – those who organised the conference and those who were invited – for excellent discussion of the issues it covers. I am also grateful to the Templeton Foundation (grant #6263) and the Australian Research Council (DP180102384) for their support.

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