

Gamification and Value Capture

1. Gamification: Lots of applications these days are taking ordinary life activities and “gamifying” them. That is, they make use of features typically found in games, like earning points, setting clear goals, challenges, and achievements for the user, in order to make the activities more game-like. Some examples include:

- Duolingo (language learning app)
users accumulate badges, maintain streaks, compete in tiered “leagues” against other users
- Fitbit (fitness tracking app)
users track “steps”, earn badges, compete in leaderboards, etc.
- Headspace (meditation app)
users accumulate badges, maintain streaks, accept challenges, etc.

This can be a useful motivational tool. It’s *difficult* to learn a new language, or try to stay fit, and hard to find the motivation to do it. (*Two-thirds of people with gym memberships rarely or never use them!*) But consider gaming: Players are frequently willing to “grind” through repetitive, boring tasks for hours. (*Like, I’ve spent SO many hours smelting and blacksmithing in Skyrim, or farming dragon parts to upgrade my items in Zelda...*) Why?

2. Value Clarity: Real life is hard. It’s hard to know what you should be doing, or what you should value, or to know how well you are doing in life. Games offer a kind of clarity that is an escape from that. We are TOLD what to do, and what to value, and are given a clear sense of how well we are doing, with easily visible, quantifiable, objective measures of improvement and achievement/success. “In games, values are easy,” says Nguyen.

The seductiveness of that level of “value clarity” and that sense of success and achievement can be fun, and addictive. So, why not take that feature that makes players willing to spend hours farming armor upgrade parts, and use it as a tool to motivate them to do things that might really improve their lives? Gamification might help us to avoid the drudgery of daily activities that it would be good to do, but might not otherwise enjoy.

Games are good, and fun. So it stands to reason that gamification of ordinary life is also good, and will make things more fun. Right? ...RIGHT??

3. Value Capture: But, the seductive clarity of gamification may come at a cost. When the objectives of an activity are clarified / simplified / quantified / etc., then this can change the way that you *approach* that activity.

For example, I did Duolingo for a year during the pandemic. I started out wanting to brush up on my Spanish, but quickly got caught up obsessing over maintaining my place in the “Diamond League”. (It was a devastating day when I slipped into the Obsidian League, which is for total losers.) An interesting thing happened: I was no longer aiming at learning Spanish. Instead, I was frequently choosing quick and easy tasks on the app (which were less conducive to learning) so that I could quickly rack up points to maintain my league position. *(Pro-tip: Score a bunch of points during the last 10 minutes before the weekly rankings on Monday evening, to knock other users down into the lower league when there isn’t enough time left for them to do anything about it!)*

In short, I had been “value captured”. That is, my initial aims and values (learning Spanish) had been captured and replaced with different, gamified goals (earning points). Something similar can happen in other gamified apps – e.g., a user gets Fitbit with the goal of improving their health, and ends up obsessing over “step” counts.

Maybe that’s not SO bad in the examples above. Obsessing over points in Duolingo will still inadvertently result in SOME language learning; and obsessing over getting enough “steps” in each day will likely contribute to SOME improvement in health. But note that the two goals do not *necessarily* go hand in hand.

Value capture as a result of gamification can be more damaging in other contexts. Consider, for example,

- Twitter (and TikTok, Facebook, etc.)
chasing likes, shares/re-tweets, views, number of followers, going viral, etc.

What are some healthy aims or values someone might initially have when joining social media? Perhaps they sign up with an interest in building relationships, or promoting sharing and growth among others, or promoting truth, or learning, etc. Pre-gamification, we all come to social media with diverse goals and values. But, says Nguyen, Twitter compresses this diversity into one single goal – virality. Chasing likes, shares, views, followers, etc.

4. Gamification of Social Discourse: On Twitter (I refuse to call it 'X') and other social media platforms, many of us exchange our initially rich and subtle range of values for the platform's artificially narrow (and impoverished) ones, and then reap the rewards that come with gamification (the pleasure of knowing exactly how successful you are, and of having our aims clarified and simplified for us). When this happens to someone—when they start chasing the numbers—they have become value-captured. And, whereas that might not be so harmful if it happens on Duolingo, there's a real danger when it happens on Twitter. Consider:

- **Oversimplification of Values:** Compare someone who is deeply moved by your post—maybe it changes the way they see the world—with someone who is just scrolling quickly and is momentarily amused by your post in passing. Both of these reactions will both appear as exactly the same thing – namely, a single “like”. There's a complete loss of the richness or subtlety in your interactions.

A similar thing happens on Rotten Tomatoes, where the most mediocre movies get ranked as the “best” movies – ones where almost everyone who saw it found it mediocre but passable will appear as a 99%. Yet good art is often divisive. A movie that deeply moved 50% of people, but didn't connect with 50% of others, will appear as a 50%. For example, presently:

Audience Score

Sonic The Hedgehog 2: 96% ; *PAW Patrol: The Movie*: 97%
Everything, Everywhere, All At Once: 79% ; *Severance*: 80%

Critic Score

Paddington 2: 99%
The Shining: 84% ; *The Matrix*: 83%

- **Value Capture:** Just as the natural aim of belief is truth, the natural aim of earnest discourse is the collective pursuit of truth and understanding of the world. But, gamification changes the aim of social discourse, to instead pursue likes, shares, views, followers, etc. – and these things are not necessarily correlated with or conducive to truth or understanding or community.
- **Toxicity:** What's worse, gamification on Twitter tends to reward toxicity. The things that tend to get the most interactions or go the most viral are the things that are often the most outrageous – often inspiring anger or division.

In short, gamification risks affecting *US* by changing what we direct ourselves toward, and what we value, adopting values and goals that are impoverished or even harmful.

5. Further Food For Thought: Consider some other instances where a false or misleading sense of value clarity might result in value capture:

- GPA

Perhaps you arrive at school with the goal of learning about the world, experiencing personal growth, improving your critical thinking, communication, and writing skills – but end up caring solely about GPA (regardless of whether it is accompanied by learning, etc.). You might even end up avoiding courses or paper topics that are seen as more challenging, and playing it safe by pursuing the “easy A”.¹

- School Rankings

Perhaps you originally set out to find a graduate school, law school, etc., which has professors who work in an area that you are interested in, or have reputations for good guidance of their advisees, etc., and end up just aiming at going to whichever school is ranked the highest.

- Money

Someone might pursue money with the goal of being able to afford the things in life that will contribute to their well-being – food, shelter, enjoyment of their time off with their loved ones – and end up chasing the higher paycheck as an end in itself. Perhaps they even *sacrifice* their well-being by taking a soul-sucking job with few opportunities for meaningful work, and which doesn’t serve to make the world a better place, etc., *merely* because it pays so well.

- Weight

Someone might start tracking their weight with the goal of feeling healthy, but end up obsessing over the numbers – possibly even *sacrificing* their health in the process.

- GDP, etc.

In the wake of the recent inflation and economic hardship, the administration keeps pointing to how low the unemployment rate is, and how high the stock market and GDP are, and insisting that the economy is doing well. But people aren’t experiencing this at home, as they suffer the hardship of not being able to afford rent, or groceries. Many even find it *offensive* to be told that they are actually doing well, when they knew quite vividly that they are not. When we fixate on the pursuit of such numbers, do we lose sight of the actual well-being of the people? (Shouldn’t our answer to “How well are Americans doing?” include facts about things like physical & mental health, food & shelter security, work-life balance, education, connection, happiness, and so on?)

¹ Nguyen points out that administrators, managers, governments, etc., like this kind of compression because it’s really hard to get a bird’s eye view or measure of success when the values are rich and subtle and complex. By compressing everything into a single, universal metric (e.g., measuring the success of both an art major and a physics major by GPA), it allows you to get a measure of success that can be compared across fields, quantified, understood easily, etc. [Elsewhere, he gives the example of switching to the acre from the “hide” – i.e., a unit of land that could support one family, which varied in size depending on the quality of the land (e.g., water source, good soil, game for hunting, etc.).] Such compression leads to a false (or at least over-simplified) sense of clarity, which is seductive because it raises our degree of confidence. (He adds elsewhere that **conspiracy theories** are seductive for this same reason – a false sense of clarity, where the explanation for all that happens in the world is made easy.)

Or consider other apps that have gamified ordinary activities. For example:

- Tinder (dating app)
aiming at the number of matches; swiping left/right feels like a game; in-app extras like “boosts”.
Is this really promoting a healthy approach to dating and relationships?

Can you think of other examples?

(Side note: In addition to the negative features already identified, Nguyen also considers: As we become more addicted to gamified activities, this may also limit our freedom. There is no app that gamifies the development of empathy, or the appreciation of poetry, or deep and meaningful social interactions. In the absence of such apps, might someone who only pursues gamified activities inadvertently stunt their own personal growth? In that sense, does gamification *limit our autonomy*?)

6. What Should We Do? What should we actually value? We’ve discussed that question in previous lectures, but as a reminder of our brainstorm, some examples likely include:

- Goodness (Be a good person, cultivate virtuous character, put good into the world.)
- Truth (Pursue intellectual growth, improve critical thinking skills, learning, knowledge.)
- Beauty (Seek out, recognize, and appreciate aesthetic beauty in the world around you.)

Are there others? Perhaps these:

- Love, friendship, community, relationships
- Happiness
- Autonomy, freedom of choice
- Health

And so on. Our actual values are rich, subtle, and often hard to express, and difficult to compare with one another. Games and gamification typically compress all of this into one single, unified “currency” to aim at instead. The healthy approach to such metrics is to recognize them for what they are, but resist the seductiveness of being value captured. (Do you have any ideas for how we go about doing that?)