# C. Thi Nguyen's Ideas of Values and Gamification

C. Thi Nguyen

- Philosophy and game professor at University of Utah
- Author of *Games: Agency as Art* (winner of American Philosophical Association 2021 Book Prize)
- Former food writer for L.A. Times
  - Drew similarities between games and food as both amazing things the "overculture hasn't yet learned to appreciate" (Carroll, 2021)
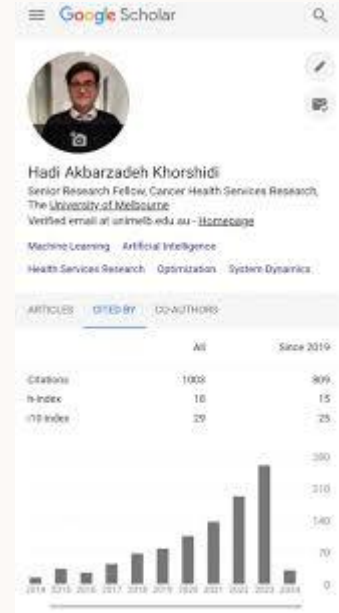
Games and Autotelism

- "Agency as art"
- Wittgenstein: Nothing is definable, for example, a game.
- Bernard Suits: A game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles for the sake of making possible the experience of struggling against them.
- The power of games is that they force you to accept that certain activities are worth doing for their own sake
  - Autotelic = doing for the doing rather than the ends
- Modifying things to get more ecstasy
  - More of the epiphany from learning? → chess
  - More graceful motion? → rock climbing (Nguyen, 2022)
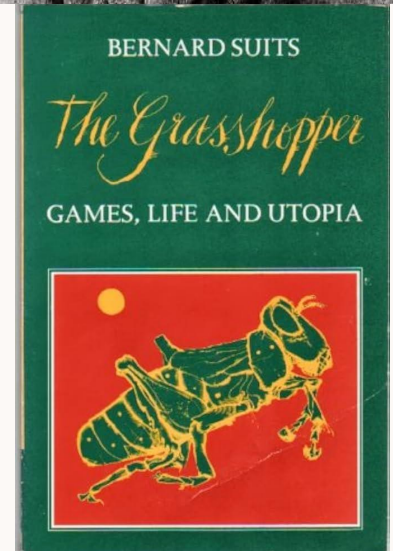
Gamification

- Prevalent views: If you think games are good, you should think gamification is. BUT
- Overly clarified value system forced on real world interaction is an "existential horror," for the same reason games are great:
  - One can't escape unclarity → refusal of that leads to ppl needing clear values, people will look for metrics to escape moral cloudiness and escape making own value decisions
- Games have seduction of clarity because you know if you won or lost (and everyone else's goal)
(Nguyen, 2022)

Value Capture

Nguyen, 2024, p. 473

2. VALUE CAPTURE

Value capture happens when:

1. An agent has values that are rich, subtle, or inchoate (or they are in the process of developing such values).
2. That agent is immersed in some larger context (often an institutional context) that presents an explicit expression of some value (which is typically simplified, standardized, and/or quantified).
3. This explicit expression of value, in unmodified form, comes to dominate the entity's practical reasoning and deliberative process in the relevant domain.

If you would like a portable version, try this: *value capture happens when a person or group adopts an externally sourced value as their own, without adapting it to their particular context.*

- Outsource the essential process of value deliberation by buying into value system (without adjusting it for your own purposes!) (Nguyen, 2024)

The Seduction of Clarity

- Clarity makes you stop thinking (heuristic to stop thinking: <mark>feeling of confusion means keep going, clarity makes you stop</mark>)
- Many forces have incentives to make satisfying things
- Ask: *Is it right or does it just feel good to believe it?* (when you're exposed to Twitter/info)
- Ask: *Is this moral worldview too yummy?* (Nguyen, 2022)
- Ways to create false clarity in people/thought-hacking
  - <mark>oversimplifying explanation</mark>
  - <mark>oversimplifying numbers</mark>

Moral Outrage Porn
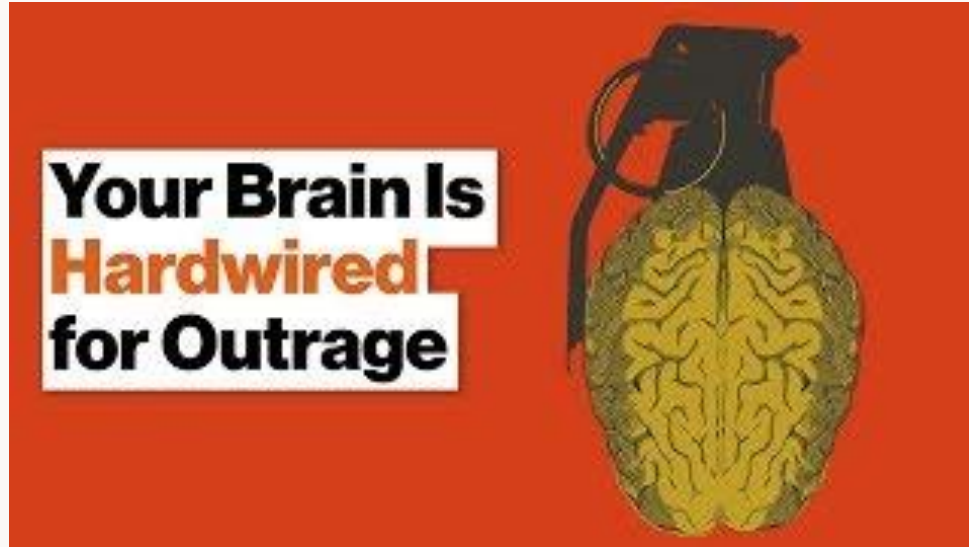
Fun fact: Lack of serotonin (in turn, neurochemically, traced to lack of adequate nutrition) makes people more likely to punish because it increases dopamine and they may be more sensitized to unfairness

X-Porn

Using a representation of something for gratification without attending costs & consequences of actually engaging in it (Nguyen, 2019)

Moral Outrage Porn

Engaging with a representation of moral outrage for gratification freed from attending cost/consequence of morality OR outrage.

→ Public simplifies their moral system and receives pleasure as payment (Nguyen, 2019)

"Replacement theory" Facebook post

Chain "anti-rape" post from Instagram/Facebook

Repost if you are against rape. I see who views this. If you don't repost I will lose all respect for you

Incel YouTube video meant to trigger moral outrage in insecure men

0 MATCHES   99+ MATCHES

Why Women Prefer Betas

HealthyGamerGG ✓

97K views · 18 hours ago

New

20:44

Quantification (and Standardization)

- Numbers oversimplify information & lose sensitivity and nuance (in contrast to qualitative information)
- Numbers and standardized values are useful to *bureaucracy but not people*
- When a metric is assigned to a complex, more qualitative value, people frequently become overly preoccupied with it

Value Federalism

Nguyen's offered solution to value capture:
- Some values are best pursued at the largest scale, some smaller, some individually… (Nguyen, 2024)

Epistemic Manipulators

Nguyen warns against epistemic manipulators' ability to easily:
- Manipulate sense of clarity, morals through moral outrage porn, values/goals via quantification/gamification

→ To build belief system for virality, give a belief system with:
  - Easy explanations for as many phenomena as possible.
  - Simplified moral system that condemns everyone on outside.
    - Moral outrage porn gives pleasure for adopting simple belief system
  - Gamified so people focus on narrow goal and get pleasure for doing so (clarity of numbers connected to pleasure of games–quantification. x porn.).
    - *Numbers hide nuance, make measured thing most salient*
    - *Gamification gives people pleasure for adopting (quantified) simplified goals*
  - Put in echo chamber to seal off.
    - Echo chambers dismiss complexifying new ideas (relevant voices) from the outside (Nguyen, 2019)

All these systems reinforce + encourage narrowness of moral vision. Online experiences are designed to give you pleasure, designed to be sticky, thereby engineering narrow-mindedness (Nguyen, 2019).

Echo Chambers/Conspiracy Theories

- Social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited (echo chambers: don't trust people from other side)
  - Systematic undermining of trust of certain institutions credibility and relevant outside voices
- Epistemological question of trust, not information
- The Great Endarkenment: Great Enlightenment created own downfall b/c intellectual autonomy created so much science that it's impossible to be intellectually autonomous
  - So to hold on to the idea you have to understand everything might eventually put you into a conspiracy theory b/c not possible to prove everything you know or know everything you know is true, thereby possibly rejecting trust in science
  - "Don't be sheep," → need for one simple explanation to contain the world, to control vast sphere in a simple system whereas science puts significant trust in epistemology…

→ If it explains everything, might be grounds for distrust (Nguyen, 2021)

Epistemic Bubbles

- Informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission (don't hear people from other side)
- Different from echo chambers, wherein other relevant voices have been actively discredited (don't trust people from other side) (Nguyen, 2018)

Trust in Epistemology

- People showing evidence are not showing evidence per se, but showing scientists whom they trust to process the evidence
  - No one is able to verify everything they trust
- Math proofs might be understood by 10 people and everyone else trusts them...
- Trusting scholars b/c faculty at Ivy = heuristic which is usually correct at evaluating, ultimately, can't evaluate everything (Nguyen, 2021)
- Information ultimately useless without trust...

What are the Criticisms?

- Debate about whether striving play exists (C. Thi Nguyen argues that majority of play in games is striving play vs. achievement play)
- Doubts about if the ideal of intellectual autonomy necessarily drives one to be fall for a conspiracy theory
- Nguyen argues that implementation of the Human Development Index was "not attached to any concrete real-world incentives or rewards" for nations (Nguyen, 2024, p. 474). This seems highly unlikely to me.

My Opinion

Relating social media to Nguyen's conceptions of value and gamification, I'm first drawn to *gender* as an instance of value capture: as people, our values towards our behavior, self-expression, and identities, are rich, subtle, and inchoate. We are immersed in many larger contexts which present an explicit (simplified and standardized) expression of gender, which, in unmodified form, "come[s] to dominate our practical reasoning and deliberative processes"(Nguyen, 2024, p. 473) (i.e. the binary of man/woman.) Gender-focused echo chambers on social media, whether among men, women, or otherwise, are so successful because of how social media simplifies gender values.

Social media, as already gamified discourse, incentivizes us to
- Continue to simplify our values and ideas about gender, ex. what a desirable woman is, what endangers women, what a "girl's girl" is, and we're rewarded for simplifying our values successfully with metrics (likes) and the feeling of clarity,
- Punish people who have not adopted our gender value system, ex. competitions to roast people the best in the comments, "ratios" to "bad" takes,
- Accept simple explanations about what gender is and its role in the world (whether in "trans discourse" or "transphobic discourse")

Conclusion

C. Thi Nguyen's ideas about games, gamified discourses, clarity, moral outrage porn, conspiracy theories, and trust are pertinent to and entrenched in our critical moment, and social media ideologically reinforces our gender value-capture through over-simplification of values and explanations and punishment and distrust of voices outside of the group (essentially an example of echo chamber.)

Thank you for listening!

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