

The Ethics of Gamification

Gamification is manipulation; at least that is what many people think. Because gamification is a powerful tool for modifying behaviors, how we should consider ethics specifically for gamification?

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Gamification is often viewed through a near dystopian lens. From Jesse Schell's 2010 DICE talk on the invasion of games [1] to Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and to Charlie Brooker's "Black Mirror," it seems the only outcome for a world where gamification is prevalent is a negative one. It is therefore not a surprise that gamification has had its fair share of critics over the years. People have labeled it everything from "shamification" to "exploitationware," believing it to be nothing more than manipulation or exploitation. This has led people to question its ethical and moral implications.

Several questions arise when designing gamification-based solutions. First, what are ethics and how do we evaluate solutions against them? The next crucial question is what are the responsibilities of the designer? Should they be held accountable for the way people choose to use their system, or does their responsibility start and end with the design?

This has been discussed in academic literature, but in this article, I wish to look at the ethics of gamification from a layperson's perspective.

DEFINING ETHICS

The use of the correct terminology is key to understanding one's perspective in an argument for or against something. With that in mind, it is of use to clearly

define what is meant by gamification and ethics. Gamification is straightforward; it is the use of game elements in non-game contexts. However, many conflate ethics with social, religious, or political norms rather than treating ethics as a stand-alone set of principles. Ethics researchers Richard Paul and Linder Elder consider ethics to be a "set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behaviour helps or harms sentient creatures"[2].

At a basic level, ethics are external rules or guidelines, where morals are more personal and inherent to an individual. It may be ethically acceptable to consume meat, but to a vegetarian it may be morally unacceptable. For the purpose of this discussion, and with relation to the design of gamifi-

cation and gamified systems, ethics will be defined as "a set of principles to facilitate the design of solutions that, on balance, promote desirable outcomes for the users." The emphasis here is on the intention of the gamification designer to create systems that help rather than bring harm to others, though defining harm is potentially subjective. When you build things, you can often become so attached to them that you become blind to potential criticism or dangers. This is why it is useful to have frameworks and ethical guidelines that prevent the potential dangers of personal morals, or lack thereof, overruling ethics.

To discuss the ethics of a system, we need to have a framework to decide what constitutes help and harm to



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others. Based on our definition of ethics, I propose the following simple framework for discussion:

1. Does the system offer a choice?
2. What is the intention of the designer?
3. What are the potential positive and negative outcomes of being in the system?
4. Are the beneficial outcomes weighted toward the needs or desires of the user or the designer?

DISCUSSION BY EXAMPLE

In China a social credit system has been proposed, to be rolled out and mandatory by 2020, called Sesame Credit. The premise of Sesame Credit is to assign every Chinese citizen a score that reflects how “good” a citizen they are. This score is based on many factors, including what the user purchases through Alibaba, which is the largest online retailer in China. In an interview with the Chinese magazine *Caixin*, Sesame’s technology director Li Yingyun said the following: “Someone who plays video games for 10 hours a day, for example, would be considered an idle person, and someone who frequently buys diapers would be considered as probably a parent, who on balance is more likely to have a sense of responsibility”[3].

This scenario was visualized in a YouTube video from Extra Credit titled “Propaganda Games: Sesame Credit.”¹ The narrator envisions a world where this social credit score could be based on what people do on social media, what they purchase, and, more crucially, who they are friends with.

Let’s look at Sesame through our ethics framework. The answer to the first question here is twofold. Initially, Sesame Credit will be voluntary. However, by 2020, it will be mandatory. It could be argued making it initially voluntary will create a FOMO (fear of missing out) effect, with early adopters imposing social pressure on those who have not already joined.

The intention of the system is more complex to analyze. On the surface, this is like any other credit score, informative to the owner of the score. Knowing their score and what can im-

prove it is of benefit to the user, especially if higher scores could potentially lead to preferential treatment in the future. With this in mind, it could be argued the intention of the system, and indeed the potential outcomes for the user, are both positive and good. Going back to our definition, on balance the outcomes are desirable.

However, when you consider how the system could be used to rate your relationships and potentially monitor your life online, things start to twist away from benefiting the user and become much more focused on benefiting the designer. While participation in the system may not directly harm the user, the potential outcomes could have a net negative effect. For instance, a low social score could lead to the loss of friends and the loss of services.

This does not take into account cultural differences in China compared with other countries. It is worth noting that for some the idea of a social credit system is positive. But the potential outcomes for the user are less than ideal, and arguably the intention of the design is not to benefit the users but to benefit the state. Therefore, it fails our definition of being ethical.

The second example for discussion is the game “Pokémon Go.” Although this is not a gamified system, it does share traits with gamification and opens up interesting questions about the intention of the design. “Pokémon Go” is an augmented reality game in which players use their mobile devices and explore the real world to capture virtual Pokémon. By physically moving to different locations, players can find Pokémon and attempt to capture them.

However, the game has not been without controversy. Indeed, there were several major issues early on, including deaths related to playing the game. These incidents occurred when players were so desperate to capture Pokémon they behaved in very unsafe ways; in one fatal case, a player broke into someone’s home. This led to online discussions and articles condemning the designers for not having more forethought about the unintended consequences of playing the game. The main argument raised was this: Should designers take respon-

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHcTKWiZ8sI>

sibility for the actions of players, if players put themselves in harm's way to play the game?

To consider the ethics of the game, we need to go back to our definition and framework. First, we have to ask the question, does the game offer players a choice. The answer is a simple, yes. They do not have to download the game and play. Again, as with the social credit example, there is a fear of missing out and potential social pressure applied by early adopters. However, there is no danger of the game ever being made mandatory by governing bodies.

Next, what was the intention of the designer when creating the game? In this instance, the answer is clearly to bring joy to players. They wanted to create a game that would get people physically involved in a new type of game. Of course, they also wanted to make money. This is not a negative point—it is the right of anyone creating new products to want to make a profit from them.

When considering the benefits and negative outcomes of being in the game, we can't ignore the fact that serious harm has befallen certain players. However, the majority have found the game to be enjoyable and have faced no negative effects of playing. So, on balance, the positive outcomes of being in the game far outweigh the potential negatives. This also is true of the benefits to the player versus that of the designer. The game was made to give joy to players and it seems this is exactly what it has done. The designers have made money, but not to the detriment of the player's enjoyment.

From an ethical standpoint, "Pokémon Go" does not appear to break our rules. The game was designed with good intent and players, on balance, benefit in the way they desire. However, there is a moral concern here. While the negative events that transpired were unintended, they still happened. So, although there is no ethical issue (based on our definition), the designers did face a moral quandary. To help limit the danger people faced playing the game, they created a series of messages that reminded the player not to do dangerous things while playing, such as not looking where they are going. Early in the game's life, there was

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also the question of where Pokestops and gyms were placed. For instance, having a children's nursery marked on the map as a Pokestop could draw large numbers of people to the spot. Was this acceptable? Again, the developers took action, releasing tools to allow people to request the removal of Pokestops and gyms [4].

"Pokémon Go" represents an interesting crossroads in the argument around the ethics of designing systems. While there was no intentional harm done, it certainly had many unintended issues thanks to the lack of forethought on the designers' part. Whether or not it is right to hold them responsible for this is a question of morality rather than ethics.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious there are ethical concerns when it comes to the use of gamification. Defining the term is useful, but it helps to have a more expansive code of ethics for designers to consider when creating gamified solutions. There have been several created, notably by Zichermann and Marczewski, although some critics believe such a code does not always go far enough—the focus is more on the enterprise rather than the individual. However, the key elements of this code are a need for transparency and honesty with the user about the intentions of the system, and not creating systems that deliberately trick users into behaviors that could cause them harm. This is the central point about ethics and gamification.

Gamification becomes unethical when the designer uses the psychology of players to manipulate them to do

things that are not in their best interest. The use of random rewards to create addictive, gambling-like experiences that eventually lead certain users to be unable to exercise free will. Obscured systems that encourage users to divulge information about themselves for reasons that are not obviously stated initially. Systems that deliberately exploit the most vulnerable in society, such as the sick or the very young. These are all pertinent examples.

It is very important to keep in mind that all of these instances, and indeed all instances of ethical concerns with gamification, are not the fault of gamification as a concept, but rather the designer. Like a hammer, gamification is a tool. A hammer can be used to build beautiful houses when used by someone who understands its uses and its limitations. However, a hammer can also be used to break objects and cause great damage when used by those with less creative intentions. This does not make the hammer ethical or unethical, it is just a tool. The ethics have to be associated with the intentions of the person holding the hammer.

The same is true of gamification. The onus must be on the designer to use the techniques available to them to make gamification ethical.

Further Reading

Open Gamification Code of Ethics; <http://ethics.gamified.uk/>

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Biography

Andrzej Marczewski is a gamification solution designer and consultant at Motivait. He has been directly involved in gamification since 2011, writing regular blogs and articles on gamification at <https://gamified.uk>. He is also the author of *Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play: Gamification, Game Thinking & Motivational Design* (Blurb, 2015), and has been recognized as a world expert in gamification, especially on the topic of user and player types.

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