

# The Game of Ideas

Games have been around for millenia. As the dutch historian Johan Huizinga posits, “[playing games] is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.” Building on Huizinga’s work, the French sociologist Roger Caillois theorized there are four main categories of play: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation/role playing), and ilinx (vertigo/altered perception).

Social media in its current form is a unique example of a game. On the one side, you have millions of users engaging across all axes of Caillois’ categories of play, and on the other, a set of algorithms and design templates competing against each other, often through A/B tests, for maximum user attention. For users, we engage in the play for:

- Agon: competition for social approval in the form of likes, retweets, shares, etc.
- Alea: dubbed as a ‘slot machine in your pocket’ by Tristan Harris, platforms employ variable rewards to increase addiction - every time you pull down to refresh or check the notifications on your profile you’re not sure what you’re going to see.
- Mimicry: our Instagram profile often isn’t the most authentic version of who we are; it is our highlight reel. Through the selection of the content we choose to post, we are playing the role of the version of ourselves we wish others to see.
- Ilinx: whether it be boredom, sadness, or another state we find ourselves in, we can engage in the play of social media to distort our reality to something that’s more preferable or, in boredom’s case, something to merely fill the void.

Ilinx is a dangerous two sided coin for social media. Because it can be a reason for users to give their attention, platforms have an incentive to inspire more of it - leading to the claim by some in Silicon Valley and beyond that we are all living in our own *Truman Show* versions of reality. On every platform, we are each fed information the algorithms think we like or are most likely to engage with, which is not necessarily what’s true nor good for us, contributing to [a breakdown in truth and collective sense-making](#) in society. It is strange to think that we do not view social media as a game, even though we are dually engaging in a game and owners of the objective of the game on the other side.

A consequence of the mechanism design of social media is that social approval, one of the very core human desires and objectives, has turned into a game that you can play. If you post the right content, with the right captions and filters, at the right time, like the right content of others, comment the right things at the right times, you can grow your following and social status. Tik Tok is a good example. In the game of Tik Tok, one of the objectives is to become what is known as ‘Tik Tok Famous’, through some clever branding or a happy coincidence created by users for Bytedance. If you post a single piece of content that engages enough users, with a single tick and tock from the clock, you are ‘famous.’ Part of why Tik Tok has been so successful is because of

how seemingly quick it is for some people to achieve fame on the platform – based on how users are shown varied content from accounts beyond those that they follow, unlike Instagram.

The result of attention being the objective of the game for the platform is the relinquishment of users' rights to direct their attention and thoughts where they freely choose. Or, if Sam Harris is correct and free will is an illusion, then perhaps it would be more accurate to claim that the result is the opportunity cost of our attention and thoughts being manipulated and directed by social platforms instead of them not. Paul Graham in his essay '*The Top Idea in Your Mind*' reasons that:

'You can't directly control where your thoughts drift. If you're controlling them, they're not drifting. But you can control them indirectly, by controlling what situations you let yourself get into.'

With iterative algos that determine the content we see on these platforms; it would not be unreasonable to propose we can no longer control what situations we let ourselves get into because our psychology is being hacked for the objective of maximizing the time we spend on the app. The platforms do not care what thoughts we build out of the content we see, so long as they result in more time being spent on the platform because attention = revenue. They may even prefer for thoughts to be built out of the content we see because thought trains that originate in the algorithms ought to make the next carriage easier to predict; keeping the user engaged for longer. This is wrong and was part of the inspiration for Capella. Capella, if successful, can highlight the value being generated by our attention and thoughts, and shed light on the manipulation of each of those fundamental human assets for the purpose of generating more revenue for the platform supposedly providing each of us with a 'free' tool of value. With Capella, people will be able to reap the reward for the value they create.

Capella is a game with two axes: agon and alea. It is a game of ideas where individual consumers compete against one another for the dual objective of making a positive impact on the brand they are giving feedback to<sup>1</sup> and receiving the most Vox for each prompt, through gaining the most support from their consumer peers for their idea. Although it is unclear of the weighting that individuals may place on each of these, it is clear these are the objectives. At Capella, we like to think that the former has the higher weighting, and achieving the latter is just a happy by-product of the former, although this view may be a bit naïve. As for alea, it is uncertain how much Vox you will receive when you give feedback, as the rewards distribution is crowdsourced and decentralized. In this axis, our algorithms for how feedback is shown to other users is at play; we are responsible for continuously improving it to optimize for the best possible ranking of feedback for brands. To quote Dr. Paul Kalanithi in *When Breath Becomes Air*, "You can't ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which you are ceaselessly striving." Transparency is key to ethical game design so we strive to be clear in our objectives. Our role in the game is to facilitate the direct exchange of value between a

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<sup>1</sup> In the real world, the objective of making a positive impact in brands is a non-zero-sum game, meaning there are no limits to what one can achieve with one's thoughts and your success isn't predicated on another's failure. Arguably the only unlimited resource in the world is thoughts.

brand and their consumers, while minimizing the value escaping or being lost in the exchange, ensuring each party is better off after the trade.

There is nothing inherently bad about games, most games are great. Soccer for example is called the beautiful game for a reason. The evil in games comes when there are perverse incentives, widespread cheating, or when the game is a giant vacuum for everyone's attention with little regard for the human on the other side of the screen.