Value Clarity in Games

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12/16/2021

Part 1: Context

In class, we looked at Nguyen's argument for interpreting Suitsian games[1] as the art form of agency.[2] Under this interpretation, the game designer creates a new way of being an agent by specifying the goals and restrictions of the player agent. For example, in Chess, the player agent's goal is to win under the restrictions of specific piece movements, time control, etc. Under this interpretation, the person playing the game is essentially taking on a different form of agency, specifically of the player agent. By taking on this different form of agency, the person playing the game shares the same goals and restrictions of the player agent. Each unique game will have its own unique player agent. As such, a person playing different games is able to experience different forms of agency.

Part 2: Nguyen's argument against gamification and value capture

Nguyen's main concern is how taking on different forms of agency could negatively impact our agency outside of the game. One example he provides is the expectation of value clarity. Nguyen's argument has four steps:

a) Games often have value clarity. (+ what value clarity is)

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1 A Suitsian game is a game that follows Suits' definition of what it means to play a game. Simply put, Suit defines playing a game as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." (Suits [1978] 2014, 43 found in Nguyen, "Agency As Art" pg 5)

2 Considering that we didn't define in class what an "art form" is and that a strict definition of an "art form" is not necessary for the argument, I will not be providing a definition.

b) Value clarity is seductive.

c) People who play games could come to expect value clarity.

d) Expectations of value clarity are bad in real life.

a) Nguyen argues that most goals in Suitsian games share three properties: applicability, commensurability, and rankability.[3]

Applicability is the ease in which an action can be evaluated under the scope of the given value (goal). For example, assume that I value and strive for happiness. Let's say that I give up playing video games for a year in order to focus on applying to internships. I end up getting the internship which makes me happy but over the course of the year, not playing video games made me unhappy. Did my decision increase my happiness or not? As can be seen, the application of such abstract, unclear values is difficult. Games, on the other hand, have very clear goals and values. In *League of Legends*, the culmination of your in-game action is evaluated by whether you won or not. This win is clearly defined as "The enemy Nexus' health reaching 0." As such, there is no doubt in evaluation.

Commensurability is the clarity of the relationship between two different values or the ease in conversion between different values. For example, meters and kilograms are entirely not commensurable; the fact that the object is 1 meter long tells you nothing about its weight. Game goals and values are often commensurable. In *League of Legends*, your goal is to destroy turrets and to kill enemy champions. While it seems difficult to measure how many turrets are worth how many kills, *League of Legends* provides a common scale, "Gold". By putting the

3 Do note, however, that Nguyen does not argue that these are necessary conditions for goals in Suitsian games.

value of destroying a turret and killing champions in terms of Gold, it's easy to say something like, "destroying a turret is worth 3 kills." Complex goals such as happiness or academic prowess are not easily commensurable; how much happiness does mild academic success translate to?

Rankability is a subproperty of commensurability. For complex values such as health, it is hard to compare two measurements of the value. For example, is Ronaldo healthier than Dwayne Johnson? The answer is unclear. However, for values that are commensurable, this comparison is much easier. For example, in *League of Legends*, we can say with clarity that destroying a turret is a more valuable achievement than getting a kill. The combination of these three properties is the value clarity of a game.

b) Nguyen argues that value clarity is especially seductive because of how complex the values in our actual life are. The three specific reasons he lists are: "relief from the evaluative complexities of life", "shelter from the difficulties of assessment and commensuration", and "[boosting of] our experiences of functional beauty." The first two reasons can be simplified into a common form: "There is a pleasure or practical advantages that systems with value clarity are better at providing." (pg. 198) [4]

The first reason is associated with the applicability of a system with value clarity, specifically, the pleasure of achievement and the practical advantage of understanding the value of our actions that applicability provides. Under a value system that lacks applicability, it is difficult to judge how valuable our actions are. The main issue with this difficulty is that it becomes harder to judge our progress and when it's difficult to judge our progress, it becomes difficult for us to decide what to do. For example, let's say I want to be healthier. If I have a

4 Some of these ideas aren't explicitly stated and I'm not sure whether they are what Nguyen intended. I will try to note where Nguyen implies these ideas.

clear idea that doing a total of 300000 Fitbit steps will accomplish this goal, I just have to do an average of 10000 steps per day. Even if I miss a day, I know that if I just spread out that amount with the rest of days, I will reach my goal. However, if I'm trying to do a mix of cardio, weights, and stretches, it is unclear to me how much of each I should be doing every day. I might overestimate my progress and do too little or underestimate and spend more effort than I want to. In addition, there is the additional task of me figuring out the balance between the three exercises. As such, under a system without value clarity, I need to do more work. In addition, it seems that psychologically, people are more motivated when the goal is clear. If this is true, the person using the system without value clarity has the additional task of finding the motivation to reach their goal. As such, it is practically advantageous in progression to use a system with value clarity. On top of this practicality, the clarity in progression makes it easier to experience the pleasure of achievement. In the example above, when I use a Fitbit, I know that I achieved my goal when I fill the 300000 Fitbit steps. I can say without a doubt that I did what I set out to do. However, when I'm using a more complex regimen with a more obscure goal of "better health," it's hard for me to tell whether I've actually reached my goal. I may not realize that I've achieved my goal or even if I did, I might doubt that I did and undermine my achievement.[5] In addition to the pleasure of the overall achievement, the system with value clarity allows me to experience mini-achievements more clearly. Imagine telling your friend your progress. With the Fitbit you can clearly say, "Hey! I did 100000 Fitbit steps!" With the complex regimen (assuming you don't use the days exercised as a proxy), all you can say is "Hey! I got a bit more healthier than I used to!" It seems clear that the achievement is much more "tangible" and comprehensible with the system with value clarity.

5 "Not so with life, where my labors may not bear full fruit until long after I'm dead, and where their effects may sprawl in every direction, far beyond my ability to track." (pg, 195)

The second reason is associated with the commensurability and rankability of a system with value clarity. The pleasure associated with this would be the pleasure of superiority while the practical advantage would be a more objective measure of one's ability and an easier understanding of skill.[6] The psychological process is very similar to the first. With value clarity, my rank is clear. I know exactly how many people I need to overcome to reach my desired rank and so I can plan my actions accordingly. Without value clarity, the planning process requires more effort and consideration. In addition, if a value is more commensurable, I don't need to learn the nuances of the other systems of value. As such, my efforts can be focused into one system. For example, if I had a perfect translating algorithm, I don't need to learn any other language; I just need to improve my native language. However, people spend time to learn different languages because the nuances of each language is very different and the translation is not perfect. Regarding the pleasure of superiority, we can use a similar example as before. With a clear ranking system, I can say "Hey! I am better than 100 people!" Without a clear rank, all I can say is, "Hey! I'm pretty good at this!"

For the third reason, Nguyen simply claims that "functional beauty of an action is clearer when action's goals are clearer." I believe this is similar to the pleasures associated with the first two reasons. However, one added component would be that it becomes easier to appreciate other people's achievements. For example, if I say, "Ronaldo scored a goals!" even a person who doesn't play or watch soccer can appreciate the value of that achievement as long as they have a gist that scoring goals is important in winning a game of soccer. However, if I say, "Magnus Carlsen just played 50. Qh6!" a layperson will have no idea what that means and why that's significant. Even people who play Chess, unless they are good enough that they

6 "Even if those values are in principle commensurable, that commensuration is often a difficult, painful procedure." (pg. 196)

fully understand the complexity of such a move and why it leads to a win, would not be able to fully appreciate the move.

As such, it seems clear that value clarity is seductive because of the pleasures and practical advantages it can provide.

c) The main reason Nguyen thinks that games will lead to value clarity being expected in real life is because of subtlety. Games have many aspects that shouldn't be applied outside of life. Most of the times these aspects of a game are relatively clear. I shouldn't think that it is okay to steal people's cars because it is okay in *GTA*. Most likely, I wouldn't think so because I clearly understand that the morality of stealing a car in *GTA* is vastly different than that of real life. Even with more subtle aspects such as manipulation, it is relatively clear that I shouldn't manipulate people like I do when I play *Among Us*. Nguyen's argument is that value clarity is too subtle for the player to realize its vice. Most players do not think of the clarity of a game's goals as a specific feature limited to the game. In addition, I think another argument that Nguyen can make is that value clarity is more plausible than the other aspects of a game. For example, there simply isn't a case in real life where stealing a car for fun would be considered okay. That scenario is implausible and unrealistic. Value clarity, however, isn't like that. There are examples of value clarity in real life. People use money or social status as a measurement of success all the time. Even if you realize that such a thing can have negative consequences, such examples are too accessible and realistic. As such, because of subtlety, plausibility, and how seductive value clarity is, it is more likely for players to expect value clarity in real life than other aspects of games.

d) Finally, why is the expectation of value clarity bad? Nguyen believes that such expectations of value clarity will lead us to favor value systems that have clearer values. Due to this preference, Nguyen fears that value capture could happen. Simply put, value capture is

when a rich, complex value system is replaced by a simplified system. For example, a person's health is extremely difficult to measure. However, if someone associates health with Fitbit steps, a person who expects clarity may use the Fitbit steps as a proxy for measuring their health. As such, the complex value system of health is replaced by the simplified proxy system of Fitbit steps. Nguyen provides three different accounts of value and explains why value capture is bad in each of them. The general thread in all three of Nguyen's argument is that the simplified value system is not an accurate representation of the complex value system. As such, when we evaluate our actions using the simplified value system and use those evaluations to make further decisions, we are using inaccurate evaluations to make decisions. This goes against most definition of autonomy. In addition, Nguyen argues that the expectation of value clarity will make it harder for people to judge whether the simplified value system or the complex value system is better. This would mean that people could easily get stuck to the simplified value system when in fact they should be using the complex system. For example, if I use money as an evaluative measure of my happiness, my intention would be to become happier, but I might end up choosing options that make me richer but not happier. Even with this discrepancy, I either might not realize that this is bad or even if I do, the simplicity and pleasure of using this measure could prevent me from choosing a more complex system for evaluating happiness.

Part 3: My best objection against Nguyen

My objection will be to part (a) of Nguyen's argument regarding his definition and estimate of value clarity in games.

i) regarding applicability, I believe there has to be a distinction between the applicability of the goal on the outcome and applicability of the goal on the process. Let's use Chess as an example. Nguyen argues that the application of the goal in Chess is obvious

because the win condition is a logically determinable state. There is no way for a person to reach a checkmate and after making the necessary calculations, not realize that it is a checkmate. To generalize this, there is no way for a person to reach the goal of Chess and not realize they have reached that goal. I believe that this is applicability of the goal on the outcome. However, in Nguyen's example regarding how happiness is a hard value to apply, he states that it is hard to judge whether his decision leads to a net increase in happiness. Let us apply this same format of questioning to Chess. Let's say I play the move 7. E5 and end up winning. Do I then know whether or not 7. E5 led to an increase in my chance of winning? I don't think so. The whole reason why people try to analyze Chess games is to evaluate their moves. If the application of the goal is so easy, then there shouldn't be any debate on which move was good and which move was bad. However, often times, this evaluation is not so clear. Even when provided by a precise analysis by a machine, people often don't understand how the machine reached that evaluation. As such, I am extremely skeptical that the goal of Chess is easily applied to Chess moves (the process). Unless Nguyen shows that applicability of the goal on the outcome is more significant than the applicability of the goal on the process, I do not think that the goal of Chess is obviously applicable.[7]

ii) Regarding commensurability, it is hard to deny that in games like Chess with binary (although there's technically three outcomes) outcomes, everything can be measured in terms of the goal of the game. In fact, that is exactly what most Chess engines do. They calculate the winning chances that any move gives. However, I think possibility and practicality of commensurability are different. Yes, it is possible to commensurate the value of any Chess move with the goal of Chess. However, this is entirely impractical. Human chess players do

7 I do not think that the outcome is more important to people in Chess because people don't always focus on the actual checkmate but how they reached that checkmate.

not use the metric of "winning possibility" when making their decisions. They use other sub-metrics such as piece activity, material, space, and king-safety to evaluate their position. Why? The calculations required for evaluating a move's winning possibility simply cannot be done by a human. It is true that the better you get that the closer you become to this core metric; however, no Chess player is ever able to precisely evaluate the winning possibility of all the moves without a computer. As such, it seems inaccurate to say that there is only one scale of value for Chess played by humans. Nguyen may argue that since the sub-metrics themselves can still be interpreted by a singular scale, the goals in Chess are still commensurable. However, this would mean that players have a clear understanding of how piece activity converts to material or space and vice versa. Better players have a better understanding of these conversions but for most, it is unclear. Even for the example I used before about how Gold in *League of Legends* is an example of commensurability, I wasn't entirely precise. Gold in *League of Legends* may be able to commensurate other sub-goals but there is no precise relationship between Gold and the goal of *League of Legends*, winning. For example, there are numerous matches where the team that has more Gold loses. Yes, more gold usually means that you will win; however, the relationship between gold and winning is not definite. As such, these examples cannot be considered the "explicitly and quantifiably set rate of exchange between [values]" that Nguyen considers as commensurability. Again, Nguyen faces a similar requirement as with applicability. For his argument that single goal games are easily commensurable to hold, he must show that the possibility of commensurability is more important than the practicality of commensurability in making decisions in the game.

iii) Finally, I will argue that, even if you disagree with my first two arguments and believe that even games like Chess have applicability and commensurability, Nguyen's current account for the value clarity of game is inaccurate. Nguyen's argument relies on the fact that the only goal of the player of the game is to achieve the goal of the game. However, this

assumption ignores a major part of playing games: the meta-game. Let's use Chess again with the assumption that the ELO rating system does not exist. Yes, the goal of anyone playing a game of Chess is to win that game of Chess. However, that is almost never their only goal. The bigger goal isn't to win just one match but to be more reliable in winning. Most players have the meta-game goal of wanting to be a better player (the relative importance of the meta-game goal and the game goal fluctuate). This goal is intuitive for striving players. The better you are at a game, the more nuanced the game becomes. As such, the games played by better players usually have a more interesting struggle. If this is the case, most striving players will want to become a better player so that they can experience the more interesting struggle. Now, if we examine this meta-game goal, does it have the value clarity that Nguyen claims that most games have? I don't think so. I've never been sure after a game that I became a better player. If I don't look at the rankings, it's not always clear that I'm better than someone (even if I beat them!). If this is the case with the meta-game, then it seems that the meta-game does not have value clarity or at least not as much as Nguyen claims. Even if the sub-goals of the meta-game (which would be the game goals) have value clarity, because the bigger meta-game does not, I do not think such games should be considered as having value clarity. As such, I do not think games have as much value clarity as Nguyen claims.

Part 4. My Best Reply on behalf of Nguyen

I apologize for how I will be structuring this part, but I will be giving replies to my objections in the opposite order they were presented. This is because I believe my reply to my last objection, (iii), is the strongest.

The reply Nguyen will make to objection (iii) is quite obvious. Why should we assume that the ELO system doesn't exist for Chess? In fact, most games these days have a ranking system so how can we ever talk about the meta-game without talking about the ranking system?

The reason why I separated the ranking system when talking about the meta-game of Chess was to illustrate that a ranking system is not an inherent part of any game. Almost every game can exist without the ranking system. For example, Chess did not have a set ranking system for a very long time (in fact, for almost 13.5 centuries, according to Wikipedia)[8]. Clearly, Chess is not bound to the ranking system. The point of my argument was that it may not be that games inherently have value clarity but that game companies added value clarity by adding a ranking system in order to make more people play. However, this is happening in all sectors. We have college rankings, movie rankings, city rankings, etc. As such, I wanted to illustrate that the expectation of value clarity is not limited to videogames.

However, Nguyen's strongest rebuttal is that it doesn't matter. We can't say that just because different chefs decided to add arsenic to each of their own dishes that the power of arsenic in any one dish is lessened. The fact is that most games currently have a rating system. It doesn't matter how the rating system came to be added. These games can still increase expectations of value clarity and bring negative consequences associated with it. In fact, I can see Nguyen arguing that games are the most accessible source of a ranking system.[9] Sure, movies have rankings and colleges have rankings, but the effects of value clarity of those systems are mostly limited to the moviemakers and the college officials. Games, on the other hand, are more accessible and require less commitment and as such, it is easier for people to become a part of a ranking system through games.[10]

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8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_chess

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elo_rating_system#Implementing_Elo's_scheme

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10 My response to this is weak; however, my hope is that if my analysis of value clarity in games is correct, we would at least know that we should try to deal with the ranking systems in games and not the games themselves when coming up for ways to fight expectations of value clarity in society.

For (ii), I argue that Nguyen needs to show that the possibility of commensurability is more important than the practicality of commensurability. One way for Nguyen to argue this is that if there is a possibility, people will still try to achieve it. This is true even for Chess. We learn Chess through different sub-metrics; however, whether we know it or not, the final goal is to unite these sub-metrics into one. Nguyen might argue that the fact that people are trying to do such a thing can be seen as expecting value clarity. However, I would argue that achieving such a goal is a practical impossibility and that it is easy to understand that it is impossible. As such, the negative effects of expecting value clarity would be greatly minimized.

For (iii), I argue that Nguyen needs to prove that the applicability of the goal on the outcome is important. One argument is that simply having the applicability of the goal on the outcome means that it is easier for people to achieve the pleasure of achievement. As such, such games will at the very least increase the expectation of the applicability of the goal on the outcome. This will mean that they will not be as satisfied by unclear achievements such as happiness, academic accomplishment, etc. I agree that this is a possibility but I am skeptical that the effect of this qualified expectation is as harmful as Nguyen originally proposed.

Part 5: Concluding thoughts

While I may not have decisively proven that games do not have value clarity or that they will not increase the expectation of value clarity, I believe that at the very least my objections provide a different interpretation than Nguyen's on the source of this value clarity. If the value clarity does in fact stem mainly from the ranking systems, it is theoretically possible to reduce value clarity without vastly changing the game.

One question that I think we should try to answer through experiments is whether

continuous use of simple value systems makes us worse at using more complex systems. This isn't just about expectations, but it is about an actual reduction in the person's ability to use complex systems. For example, in the transition from oral to written culture, the need to memorize things was reduced. As such, people started memorizing less things and it seems that the memorization abilities of most people went down (we don't have a lot of epic poets these days who memorize poems like "The Iliad" by heart). Could a similar thing happen if we continue to overly rely on simple value systems?