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Gamification and the Metaverse

People seem to me to be having problems dealing with enjoying their lives lived increasingly online. I live a life largely online, and with the pandemic pushing people increasingly away from the physical interaction world, I think we might be getting to the point where we do more and more that produces less and less joy in our lives.

That's why I think gamification has started to take the place of other things in the expanding metaverse.

It's not just entertainment

It's not just moving toward entertainment. Entertainment has been a fundamental of the Internet since its inception, and of cyberspace since long before the Internet. Video games came before the ARPAnet. A one-person shooting game was in place in the 1960s on the earliest computers with graphics. One of the first things done when a speaker was added to a computer was the generation of computer music. In the 1970s, computer games were replacing pinball machines, which were themselves cybernetic entertainment systems.

A life online

Arguably, there are few people who have spent more time online than I have. I'm not the person who spends 8 hours a day in an office sitting there doing grunge work and forced to use a computer for the efficiency of someone else's process. I get up early most every morning and start by going to my home office and checking emails. My calendar and other automation tracks all the things I have in planning or motion, and that takes a few hours of my time on an easy day. I eat breakfast somewhere along the line, usually bringing it to my desk and eating as I type. When the Sun comes up, I go for my walk, which takes an hour give or take, and then it's back to the computer. Sure, I take breaks, and watch TV, and spend time with my family, and go shopping, and so forth. But realistically, about 99% all of the interactions with people I know and work with are online. And not just since the pandemic.

Contrast this to my life before I was out of high school. Sure, I built and used computers when I was less than 10, but mostly, I lived in the physical world. I played, did learning activities in school with books and blocks and paints and mostly interactions in person with other kids. I played sports, walked between classes, did lunch, rode the bus, and at home, we did yard work, climbed trees, played football, and so on.

People didn't evolve this way

I think the emerging metaverse cannot continue the way it has grown, more logic than fun, more optimization of work efficiency than a source of joy. Sure, people need work, but there is a deep seated need for a life of emerged and merged learning and play. I don't think early cave people were all work and no play, because if they were, we would not be here. The arts have been lacking in cyberspace, and we are all worse off for it. We have plenty of cyber-psychology, mostly oriented toward taking advantage of others and optimizing exploitation. But what we lack big time is the sort of real-world integration of play and work.

Cognitive computing

One of the key issues in my view is the crappy interface designs we live with today. They fail to recognize the fundamental that human cognitive systems work how they work, while computer interfaces work how we design them. Originally, computer interfaces were designed based on what engineering could produce, a 2-dimensional display generating lines or dots in one, then three colors. But today, we can design many other things and implement them in electronics, even if we seem to continue to choose not to. Similarly, there is little creativity in the design of interfaces, as demonstrated by the ridiculous fads in Web site design, where everybody does almost the same thing – a scrolling window with limited graphics and unrelated sounds. Even the more creative ones seem to use the same bubble diagrams or similar graphs we see again and again. This apparently because of the common free tools and higher-level platforms, perhaps combined with the lack of people who are both artists and programmers or the use of teams of them.

Driven by technology instead of ideas

The current versions of computing environments are driven largely by technology and technologists rather than by new ideas and concepts. Even the many worlds and highly graphical interactive environments we commonly see in the emerging metaverse are largely driven by virtual realities that look a lot like the physical ones we operate in. There are still rooms and tables and people are represented by single entities. We look at pretty much one thing at a time, and have dashboards. We don't have well-coordinated sounds and visuals, and we lack the sort of full sensory experience in real-time with coordination of the real world. Yes, there are now versions of smell-a-vision, but the scents are really very naive and not being moved by wind or well mixed. We don't see combinations of movements, sounds, smells, temperature changes, and so forth that relate to the physical reality we can live in outside of the virtual worlds we create.

And the games

Most of the games I see are really just naive attempts to entertain augmented by graphics and sounds, but hardly significantly different than the text-based games that existed long ago. The interfaces are still limited and naive, and the games rarely tax the full range of mental real-time exchanges between people in the real world. The virtual twins and related technology is great at extracting information from naive users and making it look like bodies with feelings, but the interactions are pathetic and too repetitive in terms of actual human discourse. And the ideas of the games are nothing like the real games people play with each other in real interactions. I did enjoy the 'digital twin' body language responses though.

Cybersecurity in the gamification of the metaverse

When we consider the future of the metaverse and gamification, for those who actually think about it, it seems incredibly naive and limited to linear augmentation of what already exists. It's basically exploitation for the most part. Those who have read my work know that cybersecurity is a main theme of most of it, and not to disappoint, I thought I would bring it back to that a bit. People in security complain that designers don't build in security from the get go. But how many cybersecurity people are out there even trying to consider what the future will look like in the gamification of the metaverse. Basics say we are trying to assure the utility of the mechanisms. But for whom, and what is the utility of these mechanisms?

Exploitation

When I say that the gamification of the metaverse is exploitive, I suspect I will get some push back. How am I exploiting people by making a game they choose to play? Well, let's start with the fundamental concept that the underlying memes of the games and its play are oriented toward punishments and rewards that are not, in most cases, directed at the well being of the player. Competitive scoring, central storing of responses, game objectives, the structures depicted, the phrasing and sequencing, the depictions chosen, and everything else about the designs orients the users thought patterns. That's the hallmark of an influence operation.

The games run on and on, in the end taxing and potentially even damaging the human mechanisms. Eye strain, ear strain, color sensitivity, seizure behaviors, focus of attention, are all examples of results of such exploitation at the lowest levels of cognition, all to keep eyes on screens and ears in buds longer for financial gain. As we move up the cognitive ladder, there is the patterns of sounds and flashes of light, etc. that the human cognitive system interprets and comes to adapt to, which produces the ways it interprets the world, and of course this biases judgment at a very rudimentary level. Then there are the trained behaviors induced by the positive and negative feedback and the expectations that drive and limit interpretation. And the focus of attention which tends to be very narrow and directed toward points, as opposed to the big picture and peripheral vision, what's behind you (which is generally ignored in such games), look up, and so forth. Language selection and usage again produces biases and introduces and deprecates language and expression use within and outside of the metaverse.

At the social level we see the now rather obvious effects of memes spread through the Internet and influence operations in social media. But the diffusion of social norms in the metaverse seems to imply something similar to a future of distinct independent societies you might find on multiple planets far apart from each other. Violence and conflict-oriented games ultimately drive the thought patterns of their users. As people are more and more inundated with the metaverse and live more of their lives within it, the social norms of virtual environments spill over in the real world, as I suspect there is plenty of evidence for already.

Living the good life

At the end of the day, different people have different ideas about how they want the world to be. Some want power, some want peace, some want enough food to eat. I have a simplistic view that leads my philosophy in this regard. The equation of (the good) life.

Smiles – Frowns (☺-☹)

Maximize this equation for the world, and the world wins. Maximize it for yourself and you win.

Conclusions

The gamification of the metaverse is a threat to the social order – which is not to say this is a bad thing. There are plenty of things in the social orders of societies today and in the past that should be torn down. But anarchy is also not the path to a good life. We need to seriously consider what the goals of the games should be if we are to live in a world we wish to live in. My experience tells me that local optimization is achieved through global optimization for this equation, as we smile and frown more together. ☺