Are We Measuring Our Lives in All the Wrong Ways?

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The philosopher C. Thi Nguyen believes that to understand modern life, we need to understand how games work.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

ezra klein
I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

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When our editor Rogé Karma joined the show years ago now, he won my heart by writing up this typology of our episodes. And one of them was called "A New Lens." These were the shows where you walk away with a new lens through which to see the world. Not, of course, the only possible lens. Maybe not even the most correct one. But one that illuminates new facets of life. One that makes the invisible visible, that you almost can't help seeing through after you hear it. And this is that kind of show.

C. Thi Nguyen is that kind of thinker. I got introduced to him by one of you, actually. We got an email into the EK show account saying, hey, check out this philosopher. He's done all this work on games, on Twitter, on echo chambers, on the nature of truth. Kind of sounded up my alley, and so I clicked on a few papers and I got totally hooked. There's something very seductive about the way he thinks and structures the world.

And it all comes back to the fact that he is a philosopher of games. He even wrote a book on them, "Games, Agency As Art." And he believes games are a unique kind of not just art form, but just form, medium, because what they manipulate is our agency. You can think of visual arts, like painting, as manipulating what we see. You could think of music as manipulating what we hear. But games— games manipulate what we do, how we do it, why we do it. And the way most of them do this is by keeping points.

But why does keeping points matter to human beings? Points are usually these imaginary things that don't cash out to anything in the real world. And yet, when we enter games, we become ferocious about points. We will ruin friendships, flip tables over points. And that's all fine for a game. I mean, not the ruining friendships part.

But the thing is, more and more of life is structured like a game. Increasingly, corporations, institutions, governments have begun to understand how powerful this way of transforming and shaping our agency, our behavior is. And so social media is structured like a game. Our school and work lives are structured around points, ratings, grades, metrics.

And the problem that emerges here is twofold. First, these point systems often don't measure what we want to measure. They artificially simplify or distort our values. Our goals are messy. They're strange and complex and multifaceted, but then they are collapsed down to scoring systems. And the thing that can happen here is we lose sight of what we wanted and we begin to want what the point system wants. We don't play the game. The game plays us.

And this, in my view, it is the single best way to think about the problems of social media. He's got this great paper, which we talk about, about Twitter and the gamification of discourse and conversation. And once you hear his take on this or read it, you kind of can't go back.

But the other problem is we often don't know which game we're playing or even that we're playing a game at all. And that's what can make this insidious. We are being changed by point systems and structures that we're not taught to see, that often have incentives and logics that are hidden from us. And so we find ourselves caught trying to win something that in the cool light of mindfulness we may not even want to be playing. As always, my email EzraKleinShow@nytimes.com.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

C. Thi Nguyen, welcome to the show.

c. thi nguyen
Hey. Welcome— wait, I'm welcoming myself? Thank you.

ezra klein
We're all welcome here. It's a welcoming atmosphere.

c. thi nguyen
I'm happy to be here.

ezra klein
You've said that the world is, and I'm quoting you here, "The world is an existential hellscape with too many values and games offer a temporary relief from that." What do you mean?

c. thi nguyen
Thanks for starting there on that quote.

ezra klein
I always try to begin on existential hellscape.

c. thi nguyen
I think that one of the most interesting things about games is that games just don't like tell you a story or create a world. I mean, they do these things, too. But they also tell you what to care about. Reiner Knizia, one of my favorite game designers— I was trying to figure out what

games do and how they work and what makes them special— and I found this interview where he just casually says, "The most important thing in my game designer toolbox is the point system because the point system tells the players what to care about."

And the more I thought about this, the more I thought it revealed what makes the experience of games so compelling, and so beautiful, and so dangerous, which is that they simplify the value landscape. I'm trying to live a good life and all the values that are out there for me are really complicated and really weird. Like, I am trying to parent, and be a researcher, and participate in the teaching community, and keep myself happy and not melt down during the pandemic. And it's hard to know how to measure these values off against each other. And it's hard to know how well I'm doing.

But games give you this one moment where instead of the nausea of a billion different values and you have no idea how well you're doing— games give you a moment where you know exactly what you're doing because there are points. And you know exactly how well you've done, right? You know exactly how you're succeeding, because the points have clear explicit mechanical rules to tell you how to get them. And that's not true of parenting, or research, or — I don't know— being a spouse.

ezra klein

So let me stick there on the point system, because when you think about points, one question might be, well, why do I care what this game designer has told me to care about? Why do I care what's happening with these small tokens, or this monopoly money, or Twitter retweets? None of it's real. It's all artificial goals. So how can it be such a powerful tool if it's so constructed and detached from anything in our real world?

c. thi nguyen

The structure of games is not that the points are valuable, but that the attempt to get those points, the attempts to win the game and the game's terms sculpt some kind of interesting or beautiful activity. And I think there's this weird interesting background thought.

The philosopher Talbot Brewer, in his book, "The Retrieval of Ethics," says something like we've lost sight of how important activities are and we're just obsessed with how important the output is and the product is. And that's partially because we've been swept up in this hyper-industrialized product-oriented world where we think, look, the thing that I'm trying to achieve is the thing that's valuable. And I think what we lose sight of is how interesting it can be to be caught in the process of doing something.

And that's my basic view about games. That games are these weird things where people give you artificial constraints and artificial goals. And when you take them up, what you've done is you've accepted this artist's design and now you're in this experience of like— OK, so I'm a rock climber. And one of the interesting things about rock climbing is the goal is in some sense stupid. You're trying to get up a rock the hard way.

One of my basic experiences of rock climbing is a lot of the times you're bouldering, you're trying to get up this weird, really overhung, really hard face. And as you're trying to climb up this 10-foot brutal grueling boulder, a kid will walk up the back of the boulder and look down and say, hey, you're doing it the hard way. There's the easy way up the back. And you're like, I know that. And if you try— I mean, I wrote a book basically trying to win an argument with this kid.

ezra klein
Well, how did the point-scoring work?

c. thi nguyen
I don't— I mean, I would like for there to be a point-scoring that would tell me how the book did. I mean—

ezra klein
Wasn't there sales?

c. thi nguyen
There's sales. That's the worry. That's actually the huge big worry that there are these measures out there like the sales numbers, the point system, the number of retweets, the number of times it gets mentioned on Twitter, the citation rates. I mean, do you have this experience with— I don't know what matters in your world— like page counts?

ezra klein
So I have this experience on two levels. So one is that as a writer, as a podcaster, I put a lot of work into this stuff. I really try pretty hard. And then it comes out and the wind is just whistling past you. And so then there's this question— I've worked on this for weeks, months — now it's out. How do I know if I did it? How do I know if all of that was worth it?

And what do I have access to? I get a couple of emails. Twitter is unusually powerful for journalists. And I think people don't realize this because it is a place they get most of their instant feedback. They put something up and then immediately people begin responding to it there. And I have analytics. I can see how it's doing in traffic. And I know, I know that these are thin measurements compared to what I was trying to do with a podcast or the article.

I know that a podcast that gets 65 percent of the traffic as my very best one of the year, but really moves people— I know that is more successful and I can't feel it. And that kind of capture by the points that I do have access to, as opposed to the ones I don't, is I think one of the hardest pressures to titrate as a journalist or probably just as a human.

c. thi nguyen
I've spent a lot of time on the edges of academia with everyone telling me that working on games was the stupidest possible thing. And in the last two years, I've achieved some measure of professional success. People are excited about the thing. But especially achieving professional success during Covid, you're just alone in your room.

Here's the thing that a lot of people don't understand about writers. I've been writing for most of my life. And you write this thing and you put your heart into it. And then you put it out and it's just there's nothing. You're just alone in your basement the same way you are every single day. And you put it out there, and then the thing that happens is once in a while you tweet something or it'll get something out there and then the world just gives you this feedback.

The weirdest thing that's happened to me this week is that I played Wordle twice and I tweeted about it. And it went kind of viral. And suddenly it's undeniable that the world cares. You can see those numbers ticking up and up and up. And it's so sharp and it's so clear that it just catches your soul. Because there's nothing else.

So I wrote about this in my "How Twitter Gamifies Communication" paper. I think a lot about the difference between the Twitter experience and the classroom experience. When you're in a live classroom, like with 200 students, and you say something, and most of the students are like whatever and then one student like it electrifies them. And they— you can see them just stand up straight and get intensely, brutally excited. I care about that. And that matters. And I can feel that it matters because they're there in the room with them.

But on Twitter, if you tweet something out and one lone person out there— it moves them, it changes them, it changes their world— that's not going to register. What that's going to look like is your tweet got one lonely like and you're going to feel like a failure. And one of the interesting things about this experience is the process of quantification of Twitter peels off all that richness.

There's all the stuff that you don't see. All you see is the number going up. And the number going up picks up on some really simple things. It doesn't pick up on how deeply someone cared about what you said. It picks up on whether they clicked like. And a lot of times people click like because something made them laugh for a second, not because it moved them two weeks later.

So the basic thing that I keep thinking about is that point systems are really narrow, and really clear, and really simple. And in games— in real games— when the point systems aren't attached to— I don't know— the political life of our nation, that's great. It's beautiful. And we can talk about why that enables all these kinds of beauties. But when you attach that to something in your life, like— I don't know— Fitbit, or Twitter, or grades, or, probably for you, the number of downloads on your podcast, that thins out so much of the richness and the plurality and the different ways that we could value things.

ezra klein

So I want to let us jump around, because I enjoy conversations we jump around. But I'm going to signpost a bit of this for where we're going, so people have a map to follow, which is that Twitter paper you mentioned, it's what got me interested in your work. And it is to me

the single best thing ever written on Twitter. I think it completely explains it and we're going to go through it in some detail.

But I do want to stay in the deeper questions of games for a bit. Because, to me, what you're able to do is, one, reveal that a lot of what we're doing in life is structured as a game. Some of it we understand to be a game. Some of it we don't. But a lot of our life now is structured across point systems. And I was thinking about this reading some of your papers.

It seems unambiguously true to me that if you compare my life with somebody living 200 years ago or 500 years ago, the number of point systems that surround me, the popularity of point systems as a way for me to track, modify, and judge my behavior, and for others to do the same to me, has just exploded. I don't think there's a measure of this exactly, but I have to assume it's orders of magnitude higher. We live a quantified point-scored life today in a way that somebody in the 1700s, to say nothing of the 1200s, didn't.

c. thi nguyen

Since I finished the "Games" book, I've been trying to figure out exactly this question, why we're seeing this increase of points everywhere, not just inside formal games? And the answer seems to be that quantified measures are extremely good tools for large-scale bureaucracies to organize themselves.

So the most interesting book in this space is this amazing book from Theodore Porter, "Trusted Numbers." This is a book that's trying to analyze the rise of quantified reasoning, especially in political life and bureaucratic life, especially cases where you have some numbers, some measure, and we know that it's not measuring the real thing, but it becomes dominant anyway.

So in my life, this is like G.P.A. We know that grade point average does not capture everything that's important about educational life. We know it doesn't capture increasing virtue, increasing humility, increasing human curiosity. None of that is in G.P.A. But the thing that Porter says is that when you quantify in an institution— and I want to stress here, this is not about quantification in any circumstance, right— this is about quantification in bureaucracies and institutions— what you do is you kind of take really context-sensitive nuanced information that requires a lot of background to understand and then you carve out all of the subtle nuance and all the weird little information that needs a lot of shared context to understand.

And the reason is because this information needs to travel. In a large-scale bureaucracy, there are lots of people that need access to the same information. And they won't have the same background. They won't have the same contextual richness. And so he says that what an institutional quantification does is it concentrates on this little nugget that's invariant and this lets the information travel easily between context and it lets it aggregate easily.

So again, for me, in education, the easiest example is grade point average. You could actually imagine a university without any letter grades in it, right? You could have this rich qualitative feedback. I could tell one student who wanted to be a journalist, we could work on their writing and the clarity of their writing.

And I could tell another student who wanted to be a philosopher, we could work on exactly getting the right kind of logical formalisms. And another student who was in my ethics class who is there because they're going into medicine— they're never going to write anything, but they really want to understand these ideas— I could work with them on what the ideas meant and how it could inform their lives.

I don't actually need in any of these cases, for their educational growth, to assign them a letter grade that's on a scale that could compare one student to the other. But information— the kind of information that this generates, these rich, qualitative reports, they're not going to travel well. They don't aggregate easily. A dean from the business school isn't going to understand them.

So in order to make that information travel well, I need to create this neat little informational packet where I strip off all of the weird context-sensitive stuff and just create something simple. In this case, I rank each student inside a pre-established spectrum— F to A. And that information, right, is totally comprehensible to anyone. It aggregates easily. Everyone collects it in the same way. It's been standardized. It mounts up.

So if you have large-scale bureaucracies that need to be organized and function coherently, then you need these kind of simple, nuance-free packets of information. And I think that's one of the reasons we've seen this constant rise of simplified metrical analysis.

ezra klein
This reminds me a lot of James C. Scott's "Seeing Like a State."

c. thi nguyen
Oh my god, the entire— my entire life arc right now is doing philosophy with Scott's "Seeing Like a State." I mean, so for the readers— I've been talking too much. Do you want to give them a quick summary of "Seeing Like a State"?

ezra klein
No, I want you to keep talking.

c. thi nguyen
OK. So what Scott says is that large-scale states— and by states he means corporations, he means countries, he means large-scale globalized capitalism, any kind of large, integrated institutional information-processing unit. He says, large-scale states can only see the kinds of information they can process. And the kinds of information they can process are things like this— standardized, quantified information.

So he thinks that only the parts of the world that are legible to the state, that are put in the terms a state can understand, that's the only kind of thing the state can process, act on, and see. And so the state wants to transform the world into the kinds of things it can work on. The state can't see my individual feedback about my students, about you know, what they need for their emotional arc. It can see the letter grade average of the university.

I think what I'm working on— see if this makes sense to you— is applying "Seeing Like a State" to our souls. If our taste and our values and our interests are varying and wide, and plural and rich, the state can't see that. The state can't get a handle on my bizarre taste in the tabletop role-playing games.

So just like Scott thinks if the state wants to be able to process our cares and our values, it would really help if our cares and our values aligned with the kinds of things that the state can easily measure. Like if students had a rich set of different educational values, the state has a hard time keeping track of their motivations. If all students just care about G.P.A., that's easy for the state. Now people's cares and souls are just as manageable from a state perspective. Sorry, this might be incredibly cynical.

ezra klein

Well, it's not a little bit cynical. But I'm not saying it's wrong. I went to U.C. Santa Cruz for college. And I went just as they were phasing out what they called narrative evaluations. So prior to me, they didn't have grades. Or I think they did optionally. But for a long time, they didn't have them at all. And instead, every student at the end of the course was given a little essay review of how they did by the teacher.

And the problem was it was very hard— not impossible, but hard— to apply to law school with this sheaf of individual evaluations of every course you ever took. And so they phased it out. And it took this differentiation of Santa Cruz and made it more same. But you also understood exactly why they felt they needed to do it.

And I go back and forth on this. Because to go back to the journalism example, I was one of the journalists who was very excited about analytics for a while. I wanted my staff to have them when I launched Vox. I wanted us to have them at The Washington Post. I fought to get access to them in some of these newsrooms that I've been in.

And one thing I like about analytics is that outside of the context of simply argue about the flaws of analytics, not having them allows you to bullshit yourself a lot. Allows you to bullshit yourself about whether or not people are reading you, what you're really doing here, are you serving an audience. But then having them allows you to stop seeing anything they can't measure.

It's an incredibly difficult tension because it's not that the world was irenic and there was wonderful alignment between our behaviors and our souls or our institutions and the public before. And my last little association on this is you really can look at a lot of religion as

creating an implicit point system for people to live their lives. Now, they're not well-scored, but the idea was that somebody was scoring it better than— not somebody, some entity— better than you could possibly imagine. And you had to live up to that.

c. thi nguyen

Although, of course, I was just talking to a pastor and he was telling me when we were talking about this stuff that now he's getting pressure from his church higher-ups to increase baptism numbers because that's the metric that individual pastors are being judged by. And I think what you have in a lot of these cases is this massive trade-off. And the trade-off happens because without any metrics and measures, you don't have any capacity to communicate information easily and readily, and you don't have the ability to capture information at scale.

One of the basic things I want to say about Fitbit is that Fitbit can capture steps but it can't capture your joy and ecstasy and physical emotion. If I exercise and I don't use any objective measures, then I could just be fooling myself. But if I become obsessed with objective measures, then I'm not going to exercise for any of the things that fall outside those objective measures, like the aesthetic joy of movement.

Or one of the ways I've had of coping with Covid is I've learned to fish. And there's something about rivers that seems to calm my brain down and get it to stop screaming at me. But that's not something that would be picked up on any standard measure of fitness that we have available to us. Because there's no— I don't know— like spiritual wellness bit, right?

ezra klein

Oh, that's so wrong. How can you say there's no spiritual wellness bit? You have no idea how long the streak on my meditation app is.

It's so long. It's so embarrassingly long that I wonder if I have voided the point of meditation in having it be this long because now I don't want to lose it. I think about this a lot. But it speaks to, I think, this problem, which is you can track anything. But at some point, the tracking becomes the point.

And so I want to talk about that question of the point, because it's telling in this conversation that we went from games to points, to points in a array of areas in life that are not games. So these things might gamify life but they're not games. And so I want to ask that question. What is the difference between a game and something that simply has a point system?

c. thi nguyen

So I've been an obsessive game player for a lot of my life. I grew up playing computer games and video games. And then I rode the wave in the early 2000s of this explosion of incredibly innovative board games that were coming out of Europe and especially Germany. And I was in ecstasy about how interesting these games were and how mechanically innovative they were. And then at one point, I started teaching philosophy of art. And I always wanted to do

an interesting case study. So the first time the case study I tried with my students was, are comic books real art? And this fell totally flat because no student of mine could even entertain the thought that comics weren't a real art form.

So the next time I tried games. And I started reading a lot of stuff about games in the scholarly literature. And what I found in there was really bizarre and alien to me. A lot of the literature in the academic space focused on how games were a kind of movie, or a kind of fiction, or a kind of narrative.

ezra klein
I want you to ground this real quickly. Can you talk about the game "Train," which figures into a lot of these analyses?

c. thi nguyen
That game is a really odd case. I'm still not so perfectly sure that's a game. But "Train" is Brenda Romero's game. And "Train" is a really well-known kind of game art piece. And the point of "Train" is you're playing "Train" and it looks like, in many ways, a standard European board game. You're building a railway network. You're trying to optimize it. And over time the game reveals to you that what you're actually doing is it's Nazi Germany and you're building the railway network to move people to concentration camps.

And Romero was really interested in whether or not people would quit playing the game or whether they'd just be like, oh, this is the game I'm playing. OK, I'm going to try to win it. This game is really not intended to be played more than once. It's kind of a museum piece. And you go and you play it and you have this shocking realization.

People who write about games as an art form, as something special, really get super excited by two kinds of games. One are games like Romero's game "Train," because it's so obviously meaningful and ethically potent. And they get really excited about games that tell stories in ways that are familiar to us from movies and novels.

I'm actually a little worried that this kind of focus loses for us something that's really special about games. It pushes us towards the kind of games that are familiar to us. Those of us that care about art and have read about the theory of fiction or the— that kind of thing we can recognize. Things like the beauty of a really good puzzle game, or the beauty of rock climbing, or the beauty of chess— those are more alien and that's the thing that I want to understand.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

ezra klein
I found this part of the book really powerful actually, because, one, you see this in a lot of places. There's a tendency to say art is the version of the thing you enjoy that you don't enjoy. It has been turned into something so ponderous and powerful you don't enjoy it. But you go from there to say that there has to be a way of understanding what games do that is about why people play them, not the edge cases that they mostly don't play.

And you had a really interesting little riff— I think you're— if I remember correctly, you're drawing on Dewey, who says that every art form is a crystallization of some common sense experience. That the visual arts are the crystallization of seeing. That music is a crystallization of hearing. And you argue that games are the crystallization of doing. Can you talk a bit about that?

c. thi nguyen
So I went looking for some kind of philosophy to help me understand what games were. And I found this incredible book, Bernard Suits' "The Grasshopper." And this is from the '70s. It kind of got lost for a while and then re-found and became a cult favorite. And Suits offers the following definition of what it is to play a game. He says, "To play a game is to voluntarily take on unnecessary obstacles for the sake of making possible the activity of overcoming them."

Suits is really interested in the fact that when you're playing a game, you're trying to get some end state. Like if you're running a marathon, you're trying to get to a particular point in space. But we don't actually care about being at that point in space in and of itself, or we would take the easy way. We would take a lift, take an Uber, take a shortcut.

What's interesting about games for him is that you have this thing— the finish line— but it doesn't count unless you did it under specified constraints. It doesn't count unless you follow a particular path, unless you did it for a marathon on your own feet instead of a bicycle or a taxi. And the fact that the activity would lose its value if you didn't do it in the specified, inefficient, constrained way, that, for Suits, points the way to what games really are.

And the way I think of them sometimes, after Suits, is that games are constraint-constituted activities. Does that make sense? That what it is to run a race is to do it inside a certain set of constraints. Like what it is to climb a rock in rock climbing is to do it with your hands and feet and not a jetpack, or a chain, or a helicopter. So whatever is valuable about games has to be in the fact that they're constructed struggles.

So when I was thinking about the Suits— and then I found that quote from Reiner Knizia that the points are really the heart of it. What I ended up thinking is that what makes games special is not just that they create a world or an environment, but that the game designer tells you what abilities you have and what obstacles you'll face, but most importantly, what goals you'll have. So the punchline in the book is that games are the art form that works in the medium of agency itself.

What the game designer is doing is creating an alternate self for you, an alternate agent, describing the skeleton of that agent, saying here are the abilities you have, here's what you're going to care about. You're going to care about the points that you make by getting the ball through the basket with these people and you're going to care about beating those other people. And you can just take this on. And this is one of the most interesting things to me about that this reveals.

ezra klein

So this is something I found moving in your book and that has stuck with me. And it's why I brought up the Dewey quote a minute ago. That it is a fundamental thing about humans that we choose goals and we attach means to them. It's not that animals don't do this in general. My dogs want treats. Bears want honey, et cetera, et cetera. But we have a much wider range of doing this. And something you talk about in the book is we will limit our goals. We will layer our goals. I mentioned meditation a bit. I'll sit there watching breath, not to watch the breath, but to feel differently as a person.

And it's obvious in a way that painting manipulates our seeing and seeing is fundamental to us. And it's obvious that music manipulates our hearing and hearing is fundamental to us. And it's a reason I'm glad actually we ended up talking so much about non-game point scoring systems earlier in the conversation, because it does, I think, throw games into a different light to say something happening all the time in our life is we are adopting or being given goals that are attached to constraints, that are measured in certain ways, and that we can only achieve using certain means.

And oftentimes we don't have a deep consciousness of it. Oftentimes it is happening in a manipulated way. Oftentimes we don't think about it very much, because it's simply the water we swim in, so to speak. And that games are the art form where, one, that is done for us in a dedicated way, but we choose to opt into it. But two, potentially one where we can begin to manipulate that part of ourselves intentionally. We can begin to see how it can be manipulated. In the same way that I think we understand some of the art forms as making our senses more acute and our perception of the world more sensitive, games can do that for the way we see the goals and means we adopt in the course of a day.

c. thi nguyen

Yeah, that for me is what's really lying behind this bit of Dewey. I mean, what Dewey thinks is that every art form— there's something in life that we do and the art form crystallizes and extracts it and unifies it. In life, we look around and painting crystallizes and purifies the experience of seeing. We tell stories to each other about our day and fiction crystallize and purifies that.

And I think what's special about game— and this is interesting because the way you put it, makes this happen on two levels— what's interesting about games is that games crystallize and purify the pleasure in acting, right? I feel like a lot of my life, I enjoy solving cute little logic puzzles as they confront me in the day, but I don't get that many interesting ones. But like chess, or the new computer game, "Baba Is You," which is like pure, raw puzzle-solving—

ezra klein

Wait, I just started playing "Baba Is You" this week.

c. thi nguyen

Isn't it ridiculously good?

ezra klein

I literally read your book and thought I should try playing a game again. And I downloaded "Baba Is You."

c. thi nguyen

Right. "Baba Is You" is a game in which the rules of the game are inside the game itself as physical blocks that have words on them. And you can change the rules of the physics that you're in by pushing around these blocks.

So I feel like— OK, when I got into philosophy, one of the things that I got into was that philosophy reprogrammed my experience of the world, right? I would get these epiphanies and be like, oh my god, the world is totally different. It's so different from what I could see. But I also feel like, I don't know, for me, philosophy was like the drug dealer who offers me a few easy hits for free and then is like, oh, you want another epiphany? Go do research for 10 years.

But "Baba Is You" just concentrates that. The thing that was in philosophy that was so delightful and pleasurable quickly and now I have to struggle for four years to get another interesting epiphany. "Baba Is You" is just like epiphany after epiphany after epiphany. You play it for 20 minutes. You solve a level. You had another epiphany. It takes that pleasure and it extracts it and concentrates it.

And one of the reasons games can do that is because— I mean, so this is back to the existential hellscape point we started on. In the world, our goals and our abilities and the world— a lot of the times they don't align. You do what you want. And to get what you want, you have to do something incredibly boring and repetitive. Or you face problems that are way beyond you.

But in games, because the game designer manipulates what you want to do and the abilities and the obstacles, the game designer can create harmonious action. They can create these possibilities where you're— what you need to do— the obstacles you face and your abilities just match perfectly. So this is the weird sense in which I feel like games are like an existential balm for the horror of life. A lot of life is you don't fit. You have to do things. And it sucks and it's horrible and it's boring.

And in games, for once in your life, you know exactly what you're doing and you know exactly that you can do it. And then you have just the right amount of ability to do it. It's a feeling of concentrated, crystallized action. For me, solving puzzles, or balancing over in a rock climb, or seeing a trap ahead in chess, this is ecstasy. And it's an ecstasy I get once in a while in my non-game life. But game designers have sculpted these little action universes so that we can step into them and just have this ecstasy over and over again.

ezra klein

I want to note, though, that there's an inversion there of the way we are often taught to think about games. The way I was taught to think about games— I grew up as a video-gamer. I try to get back into it every so often and more or less fail now. But I played a lot of games. And the idea was that games are a break from reality, a diversion, something different, an escape.

And it is interesting to hear you describe them as a distillation. In some ways, Jane McGonigal, who's a games writer— almost a perfection of reality. But either way that the right way to understand the relationship is that they are taking what reality is, which is we are constantly opting into these different systems with incentives, and structures, and our skills, and they have to match the means to get to a goal, and distilling that down to a small core.

And one of the reasons I mention that is that games are really important. They're really big. People spend more time on games— they spend more on games now, as I understand it, than on music and movies. It's a hell of a lot bigger than reading books. But they're not taken seriously. And I guess one question this raises is, what does it mean to take them seriously?

You have this great line— the quote— "I'm more worried about games breeding more Wall Street profiteers than I am about their breeding serial killers." And that struck me because I think it's actually a very interesting way of thinking about what games do and don't do, of taking them seriously.

c. thi nguyen
I think a lot of people, both on the positive side and the negative side, have obsessed with the representational qualities of games, right? They've been— and I think it's because we know how to talk about that. They're obsessed with the dangers of graphical violence in games. And they're really interested in games' capacity to be cinematic, or movie-like, or to have good graphics, or to tell stories.

But I think the most important thing about games is the way they manipulate our agency. The way we enter into this alternate self. And that's I think where you can see the greatest power of games and their greatest danger. The greatest power of games is that you can explore this landscape of different agencies. The greatest danger of games is that you can get sucked into this experience of just craving and wanting to be in a clear, crisp and gentle universe where you know exactly what to do and exactly how well it's measured.

So when you play chess, you get really sucked into this kind of agency where you are thinking ahead and calculating linearly. When you play diplomacy, you get sucked into this agency where you're constantly thinking about how you can lie to people and misrepresent yourself. And when you play rock climbing, you get sucked into an agency where all your powers are about balance and fine precision and motion.

So I think that the body of games is a kind of library of agencies. The real promise of games, if you take them seriously, is that by playing a ton of them, you can traverse all the different possibilities of agency. You can exper— I mean, I'll tell you, I was a terrible philosopher. I had — one of my advisors told me I had a good nose for questions, but I was crap at logic and rigorous thinking. And I literally picked it up from chess, because by being in such a tight, clearly well-defined space where I knew exactly what to do, I could concentrate on carefully and logically looking ahead.

The biggest danger that I'm worried about for games is if you spend your life playing games, you'll expect that value systems will be crisp, clear, well-defined, and quantified. And then you leave games, you'll start looking around for— I don't know— things to do, or institutions to be a part of, or jobs to do where the outcomes are clear, crystallized, quantified, and shared between people. I'm worried about getting stuck in the world of maximizing your clicks or Wall Street finance just because you have an expectation that what it is to act in the world is to act for clear externally well-defined points.

ezra klein

So this to me is really important. And I want to extract out a couple of principles from it. Because something it seems to me you're getting at is that another quite profound danger of games is we will be wrong about what the game we're playing is. So to take your lovely line about Wall Street profiteers and serial killers, a lot of people think that kids playing a lot of games in which you end up shooting folks are going to think about shooting folks. That doesn't appear to be true.

What might be true is if you spend all your time in point-scoring environments, you will become used to life being about scoring points. And you will begin to adopt that approach and begin to adopt those values without even realizing it. You'll become habituated. The game will change you. That is a second principle I want to put out here— that games change us. And so with that, I actually want to go back to the Twitter paper, because I think we've laid some more groundwork for it here. And I want to read something from the beginning of it. You write, "Twitter shapes our goals for discourse by making conversation something like a game. Twitter scores our conversation. And it does so not in terms of our own particular and rich purposes for communication, but in terms of its own preloaded, painfully-thin metrics— likes, retweets, and follower counts. And if we take up Twitter's invitation and internalize those evaluations, we'll be thinning out and simplifying our own goals for communication."

And so what I take you saying there is that it is easy to forget what game you're playing on Twitter. To go there with the intention of doing one thing and soon to be doing the thing Twitter is pushing you to do, the thing that their point-scorers have made valuable. But talk to me a little bit about that process of flattening. What might you go to a place like that to do and what do you end up doing?

c. thi nguyen

Let's get grounded in the particulars and then I'll give you the philosophical background or whatever. So the particulars are you can care about all kinds of things going on on Twitter. You can care about having fun. You can care about connecting with a few people. You can care about getting knowledge. You can care about getting understanding. You can care about connecting.

But those things aren't measured by Twitter. What Twitter measures is who clicked like, who clicked retweet, who clicked follow. And what you might think is, oh, because people click like, then that's just a good proxy for all these other values. They're only going click like if you actually successfully communicated something. But clicking like is a really narrow information capture.

Another philosopher, a friend of mine, Matt Strohl, who I've written some papers with, he has this incredible blog post that really helped me think about these things. And the blog post is called "Against Rotten Tomatoes" on an aesthetics philosophy website, Aesthetics for Birds. And what he says is what's really interesting about the way that Rotten Tomatoes aggregate scores is they don't care about whether someone had a profound experience. All it cares about is whether the review was slightly in the positive or slightly on the negative. And what Strohl ends up saying is, look, one of the things we know about great art is it's divisive. And what you should be looking for when you're looking for great art is movies in which half of the people are like, "I was moved. It was amazing. It was the best thing." And half the people are like, "This is crap. This is so weird. This is pretentious." That's the likely signature of great art.

But if you go on Rotten Tomatoes and it just aggregates things and it just compares, then something that's divisive like that will show up as a 50 percent, which is a failure. On the other hand, some movie where everybody vaguely likes it just a little bit— they're like, oh, that was fine. That was pretty good. That was entertaining enough. If everyone has that same reaction, Rotten Tomatoes registers that as 100 percent likes and that rises to the top. What you can see happening in the Rotten Tomatoes case is that all these rich, qualitative reactions are flattened because they're passing through this binary data collection filter. And Twitter is doing the same thing, right? It's doing two things simultaneously. One thing it's doing is it's flattening all the kind of rich reactions you have into likes. So already you have not only a binary filter— like or dislike— that pushes you in the direction of aggregated numbers instead of a few deep connections, but you also get this timing filter where people click like only on things they immediately get.

And the third thing that happens is it pushes everyone in the same direction. If the data it's collecting is an aggregate of popularity and nothing else, then insofar as you start caring about its points, that everyone on Twitter is going to be funneled towards the same kind of thing.

And I think in games— real games— it can be really lovely to, for a moment, for everyone to care about the same exact thing. But the thing about real games is they're temporary. And you get to step back from them and you get to play a variety of them. And the thing about Twitter, and grades, and page views, and clicks is they're pervasive. We don't get to step back from them. We don't get to try a huge variety of them. We don't get to move in and out of them. We're stuck.

If the wonder of real games is the possibility of flexing through this wide landscape of possibility, then the gamification of activities in the world is doing two things to us. One, it's funneling our values down one particular pre-established path for a real world activity, for something that's connected out to politics and the world. And two, it's not giving us any space to step back.

When I play board games and video games, I play one and then I step back and I ask myself— not in the terms of the game itself— I don't ask myself, did I make points? What I ask myself was, was that fun? Was that worthwhile? Was that interesting? But when you pervasively gamify something like Twitter, you don't. You get stuck. You don't step back. You don't tour a million things. You're just in an agential straitjacket.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

ezra klein
Two things I want to do here. One is because sometimes when I begin talking about Twitter in depth on the show, people say, well, who cares about Twitter, I'm not even on it. And you're just going to have to trust me, because this is what I do for a living. Twitter is the single most important platform for politics and journalism because it is where all those people spend the most time and it is changing them. And I want to talk about the way it's changing them within this framework.

So I think if you look at what a lot of people in politics and media think they're doing on Twitter, they are writing things that on their face are meant to be persuasive. A gloss on a news article. A tweet about democracy, or single payer health care, or how Joe Biden is bad, or whatever it might be. But that tweet is then attached to a scoring system that has nothing to do with whether or not you are persuasive to the people you need to convince. It's whether or not that tweet is applauded by the people who already like you.

And, in fact, it's pretty obvious to see how those two things could be inversely correlated. Wherein if I'm trying to persuade somebody of something and they don't think like me already, the thing that might persuade them is almost by nature not going to be persuasive to the people who already think like me. Otherwise, they would already think like me. We wouldn't be having to have this conversation.

And so people are endlessly driving themselves into rhetoric that is more and more and more and more and more persuasive to people who already think like them, because it gets you likes and retweets, and more and more and more distant from the people who don't. In my view, you begin to see this coming out in staff communications of politicians, in actual opinion pieces, or news reports that people are producing.

And the reason I bring this up is because it seems to me like a pretty clear case where you have a scoring system and that scoring system is related to— it feels related to your end, right? I mean, surely if 32,000 people have liked this tweet of mine about democracy, that was a successful democracy tweet. But it actually isn't because of who it's capturing.

But then slowly I begin to just— it feels like the thing I can measure is how all my tweets are doing. And so that's what I send. So in a case like that, how would you describe what is going on there? And then how would you say you can recognize it and get out of it?

c. thi nguyen
With something like Twitter, if you get motivated by the point-scoring system, then you're internalizing a value system in your actual communication. Not in some play communication that you do just with your friends, but in your actual communicative life. So a lot of these cases, though, I want to call value capture cases.

And value capture cases are cases in which you have rich, subtle, maybe inchoate values or you're in the process of making them. And then you enter something in the world and the world offers you a simple, pre-established, already standardized, incorporated into a technology simple version of that value system. You care about education and then the world is like, hey, here are your grade point averages. Or you care about truth and communication and the world is like, hey, here's your Twitter like numbers.

And I think what the game theory tells you— what my theory of games tells you is it explains why that's so seductive, right? You get this crisp, clear sense of value. You can see the numbers mounting it up. You can see that you're successful in totally objective terms. But all you have to do to get that is to give up establishing your values for yourself. You have to just let someone in. And set your values for you.

So I think in a lot of these cases, what you're doing is you're outsourcing the process of value deliberation and you're outsourcing it to— I don't know— whoever made Twitter, or Facebook, or whatever analytics you have. The worry here is that with something like Twitter, because it's so compelling when you see those points going up, when you're connected into this objective external system, there's this huge price for striking off on your own and trying to establish your own sense of value. So does this make sense?

ezra klein

It does. And something I want to connect it to is the ways in which one's standing in a community could become a game like this? Because the thing that— it's not just Twitter, but Facebook, and LinkedIn, and actually just a tremendous amount of the entire major internet ecosystem understood at some point— I would almost say stumbled upon— stumbled upon is the word I want to use here.

They found that social feedback is incredibly powerful. And it wasn't exactly what they had intended to find, some of them. They would have been open to a lot of different directions for their products to go. But social feedback, your standing in your community is incredibly valuable. But that can be hijacked by a lot of sub-communities and it can also just lead to very strange things in life. Something I've heard you say is that when you look at QAnon, you see it as having a game-like pleasure. Could you talk a bit about that?

c. thi nguyen
I was going to write a piece about how QAnon was game-like and then I discovered that a game designer had already written it.

ezra klein
Yeah, it's actually a great piece. We'll link to it in the show notes.

c. thi nguyen
Yeah.

ezra klein
But give that argument.

c. thi nguyen
Right. So let me back up a little bit. Here's another one of the ways in which the current world is really uncomfortable and really hostile to us. You've got to trust people. You can't know everything on your own. Elijah Millgram, again, this philosopher I was talking about, has this book called "The Great Endarkenment," which transformed my philosophical life.

And basically, the way he puts it is the essential condition of the modern world is one of extreme hyper-specialization. No one can know everything. Not only can you not know yourself— all the things— you can't figure out the right experts. If you asked me to pick the right climate change expert to trust, I couldn't because I don't know enough stats to even figure out who the right expert is.

So the world we have is this painful thing in which the dream of individual knowledge is gone and you have to do this awkward, horrible thing where you trust people beyond your understanding. And then what games promise is this little world in which you can manage everything, in which you can understand everything. These little worlds where every mechanism is something you can internalize, and you can make a plan that encompasses every single mechanism the game has and it all fits.

And the interesting thing— so a lot of the research I've done that isn't on games is on echo chambers and conspiracy theories. When you read people who are excited about a conspiracy theory— like the flat earth conspiracy theory— one of the things they say over and over again is they felt so disempowered before the conspiracy theory. And once they became a flat-earther, or something like this, they felt empowered. And the reason, I think, is the conspiracy theories fit inside your head. They're the right size for you just like games are the right size for you to take some kind of action.

If you believe in a conspiracy theory, now you have total intellectual agency. You don't have to trust other people. You don't have to do this awkward weird thing of trusting somebody and trusting who they trust and then trusting all the million things— people they trust. You can think everything through yourself and then come to a conclusion using this engine that's so powerful that lets you explain anything. I mean, does this make sense?

ezra klein

Yeah, and to say something on the way it makes sense, because I think people often miss this about conspiracy theories. From the outside, conspiracy theories seem Baroque and complex. They look like very complex ways of understanding the world. But their actual appeal is that they radically simplify the world.

c. thi nguyen

They look complex. Do you know what is more complex? The world of all of science. The complexity of science is deceptive because so much of it is built into the world that we don't try to understand. We don't even try to put it all in our head at once. But the complexity of something like QAnon, it is the kind of complexity you can put in your head.

And I think it's important for the game-like aspect that it be complex, right? Because if it was simple, it wouldn't be intellectually exciting. Games are exciting when they test us and they put us right at the limit of our abilities. And then we push through and then we can make it. The games are beautiful when our whole practical self fits the challenge.

So if you expect someone to make a game out of intellectual life, you shouldn't expect them to make something so complicated that you have to do this horrible trusting thing. And you shouldn't expect them to make it easy. You should expect them to make it so challenging that it really fully engages people. But it's just the right size, so if they fight hard, they can actually find explanation for everything.

ezra klein

And something I think that gets to— because it would be easy, in a very condescending way, to sit here and say, oh, those QAnon people got trapped in a bad game, not me. But to me what all of this cashes out into is that one of the difficult things about being alive during, as you put it, the great endarkenment, is we are all choosing which explanations to believe, built to some degree on structures of social trust, not a first person verification. We can't verify a lot of what we believe we know about the world.

And in addition to that, we often don't even realize we've opted into one, either because everybody around us has opted into the same one and so it just seems like the way the world is. And I guess this is one of my big questions for you as somebody who studies this, which is how do you develop a sensitivity— not a cynicism and maybe not even always a skepticism, but just first a sensitivity to being able to see all the different game-like scored, simplifying systems that you've adopted and all of the values they are pushing you towards? How do you develop game mindfulness?

c. thi nguyen

That's a great phrase that I may steal and credit to you. I actually think there's a tiny hint in how pleasurable games are. And this is going to make me sound kind of awful, but the way I navigate the world right now is I've developed a fair amount of defensive suspicion about certain kinds of pleasure. A marker of design game-like systems is that they're very pleasurable to operate in.

So if someone out there was trying to create a belief system to get you onto it using game-like design theory to get you into this exciting usable space, then you should expect it to just feel really good when you adopt that belief system. And I think this is one of the markers, right? The real world is extremely frustrating, extremely difficult, full of things that you don't want to believe, full of things that are hard to understand.

And sometimes someone will present me with a system of belief. And as I adopt it, it just gives me everything I want. The world seems to start to make sense. I feel empowered. I feel good. Everything's falling into place. And I'm not saying that's necessarily false, because sometimes that's what it feels like to really figure things out. But I'm saying sometimes you just need to be suspicious.

And I feel like my evolution towards someone that didn't eat so much crap food that I always felt like crap is, now when I'm eating something, sometimes I can have this internal marker that's like, oh, that's just too delicious, that's just— oh, that's too yummy. And I immediately pause and I'm like, wait, has this been designed for me to over-consume and just buy lots of bags of?

I'm trying to develop the same kind of instinct in belief systems. Someone hands you a belief system and you're like, oh, this feels so good. That's— and then you have to pause and be like, wait, is this designed just to make me feel good? So the short answer is I'm now suspicious of pleasure, which I hate.

ezra klein

I was thinking while you were talking about this— about "Baba Is You," the game we were talking about earlier, which I began playing after reading your book. So I've been very attentive to what it feels like to play the game, what it feels like to work with that agency and

work with those means. And I've really noticed the feeling of pleasure when I solve a level. The emotional experience of playing "Baba Is You" is curiosity, frustration, some more frustration, a little bit of excitement, then some more frustration, then, ah, like got it.

And I understand what you're saying as being partially that life doesn't really give you that many of those, ah, got it moments. And because part of my concern is that what's really working to give these games a lot of pleasure, and these platforms and so on, is the way they flatter our groups, the way they split us into social ecosystems, and then give us points for looking better and better and better in our ecosystem.

I think that when you started looking at the world in a way where your view of your own ecosystem is, ah, we got it, we got the truth nobody else has, the morals nobody else has, that's the thing it seems to me you want to be really suspicious of. Because it's pretty unlikely that you and your buddies figured it all out.

c. thi nguyen
Wait, can I be optimistic for a second?

ezra klein
I would love you to be.

c. thi nguyen
I am both worried about the overuse of pleasure in getting us to hook onto the truth. The true does not correlate perfectly with pleasure, so you need to be suspicious there. But I also think one of the things that understanding what games are and how they do really deeply helps us see is how much pleasure there is in the world that we might be missing.

So the essential insight that I got from Suits is that in so many games, the target isn't the point. The point is this rich experience along the way. And I think a lot of the mistakes we make with games is we get into these things and we forget about these larger purposes. The fact that they can be fun. The fact that they can be beautiful. We just hyper-obsess and hyper-narrow on the product at the end. And I'm worried that in a lot of other cases, this attention to product over process is poisoning us and making us miss out on possible pleasures.

So in the book, I end up distinguishing between two kinds of aesthetics— object aesthetics and process aesthetics. So object aesthetics is like when an artist makes a thing like a painting. And you look at the thing and the thing is beautiful. And process aesthetics is where games fit for me. The artist makes a thing. And you interact with the thing and you're beautiful. Your actions are beautiful, or comic, or thrilling. And I think there's actually all this process aesthetics elsewhere in the world that a lot of us who have been trained to be hyper-oriented towards just the measurable output miss out.

Here's my best example. I started thinking about this a lot in cooking. Because I got really interested in why so many cookbook reviews focus on how good the dish is and not many cookbook reviews focus on how fun, or entertaining, or lovely, or awful the process of cooking

is. I mean, I don't know how much you cook. But I found that there are a lot of restaurant cookbooks, that if you follow the directions perfectly, you do yield this incredible dish. But the process is just this miserable, grinding, gross things.

And then other recipes where they're kind of looser and more casual and the end product isn't as perfect, but the whole process of making them is delightful. Everything flows. You're smelling things. You're tasting things. You're listening to the sizzle. Everything just feels right. And one of the things I worry about in thinking about games and processes is that a lot of activities— they have a capacity to be rich and pleasurable in the doing and then yield a good outcome.

And then we do this thing where we hyper-focus on the outcome or the product and we trade away all the richness or beauty that's possible in the process. So I mean, here's one thing— when I cook for a party, I often cook for like two hours, three hours, and people eat for like 20 minutes. In some ways, what's most important is the richness and aesthetic quality in the process of cooking itself.

ezra klein

I think that's a lovely point. And it speaks very deeply to your point about games as this inversion of means and ends.

c. thi nguyen

Yeah, so I mean, I'm trying to tie this in some galactic way to all the stuff about Twitter. But thinking about games shows me two possibilities that are like two flip sides of the same coin. And the richness of games is when temporary hyper-focus on a goal opens up all this rich, sculpted, interesting activity, all these amazing movements, or decisions, or calculations that are just lovely. That's the promise of games.

And the danger of games and the game-like attitude is when we hyper-focus on that goal and we forget about all the other stuff that could happen along the way. And we just narrowly see the goal. And like, games for me are good when you engage in a duality of experience of them. You spend some time buried and trying to win, but you realize that winning isn't the point. And then you step back and you see, oh my god, the process of doing it was so rich and so lovely.

And games are toxic for me when we just get hyper-narrowed on the point system and we never think about the larger outcome of the point system. We never think about what our life is like or what the activity is like under that point system. We never think about what follows from it. The big worry with the impact of highly gamified external systems is it encourages us not to step into a game and step back from it and think about the richness of the activity and whether it was worth it. What I'm worried about is those cases when the point system blocks out everything else from your universe and you don't see any of the other stuff.

ezra klein

I like that as a galactic bow on it. So instead of ending where we normally do, which is requesting three book recommendations, I want to get three game recommendations from you. And tuned to— I basically have played no adult board games. I've played some video games. So if like me, you're maybe somebody who played games when you were younger, but you've not exactly kept up, what are some games that'll really tie you into that pleasure of adopting a new sculpted, as you put it, agency?

c. thi nguyen
I'll give you three games in like escalating indie, arty, avant-gardeness. So if you want a game from the classic era of board game design, apparently Europe— especially European board game design— Reiner Knizia, who I've mentioned a few times, who's often called the Mozart of European board game design— my favorite game from him is "Modern Art."

It's a very simple auction trading game where you all play— it's kind of cynical in theme— you all play art dealers and you're trading art with each other. But at the end of each session, you sell all your artwork for money. But the value of the artwork is exclusively determined by how many times the dealers traded it.

So A, cynical, and B, it's this really interesting emergent market system where you're trying to time, figure out where the market's going to go, trigger market rushes. And that's a game to play if you just want a classical old school board game that creates this incredibly rich, interactive, psychological structure out of a really simple market mechanism. OK, that's old school.

New school— probably the most interesting board game for me that's come out in the last few years is "Root." It's by Cole Wehrle. It's from Leder Games. You can buy it right now. And I'm going to make this sound really weirdly intellectual, but let me just say that Cole Wehrle has a designer diary where he explains how the idea of this game came from his graduate studies into Foucauldian biopower.

"Root" is a completely asymmetric game where each different position has totally different goals and totally different mechanisms. So "Root" is supposed to capture a political power struggle, but it does it with adorable theming. It's like woodland creatures fighting against each other. So one of the possible positions is the Marquise de Cats. And the Marquis de Cats is a Bourgeois industrialist. So they play this very classical familiar resource game where they're making buildings to get resources, to make more buildings, and expand and make money.

Another position is called the Woodland Alliance. And they're obviously the Communist underground. They're trying to spread across invisibly, get the sympathy of the people. They're really weak at first. But every time anybody else punches down on them, they get more sympathy points and they can explode.

And then another position is called the Eyrie, E-Y-R-I-E. They're like the War Hawks. They're supposed to be birds. And the Eyrie plays this incredibly interesting and bizarre game where every turn— you have a plan and every turn you get to add one or two actions to your plan. And then you have to execute the whole plan in order. So in the beginning, it's great because you can keep adding more actions. You can do more things. You can do more things than anybody else.

But really quickly you get stuck on your plan, right? You have this plan. You have to execute everything on it. But a lot of the things in that plan, you put in that plan like 15 moves ago. They make no sense. And to fulfill your plan, you end up having to run around doing completely bizarre incoherent things just because you said you would. Whenever I play it, I think about I made those campaign promises and I got voted in, so I'm going to fulfill those damn campaign promises.

And another position that you're playing actually is an arms dealer that's trying to make money by fermenting conflict and playing the sides off each other and then selling arms to them. And what's really interesting to me about this game is that everyone actually has a completely different agential outlook. One of them is like focus on resources, another on disruption, another on these war-like campaign promises.

And when you play the game and you rotate through, you actually get to experience this really complex political struggle from different agential angles. And the more you rotate through the position, the more you start to understand how weird and complicated and emergent the political struggle is given different people's motivations. By the way, you would love this game. This game will drive you nuts.

ezra klein
I'm going to try it.

c. thi nguyen
It's so good. To me, one of the most interesting realms going right now is the indie tabletop roleplaying realm. And the most wonderful game I've played from that is this game called "The Quiet Year." And "The Quiet Year" is a story of collective narrative map-making. "The Quiet Year" simulates a year in the life of a village barely hanging on after the apocalypse.

And you, the players, play the spiritual forces that are challenging and helping the village. So you take turns. And each turn you draw a card. It gives you some options. And then you introduce some new element into the village and you have to draw on a map. And so you take turns telling the story of the village and building together this graphical map that represents the journey of this village as it barely hangs on.

And one of my favorite mechanisms of the game is you're not supposed to consult people about your actions. There's one possible move where you can ask a question and then everyone can answer in one sentence about what should happen, but you don't get to have a

discussion and you never get to consensus. And the game says very explicitly whenever someone else takes an action and you feel like you haven't been heard or they've disrespected your wishes, you grab something called the contempt token and you put it in front of you.

And the best part is the contempt token has no mechanical function in the game. They just mount up. So over the course of the game, you just see these piles of contempt tokens marking your grudges. And the game is supposed to simulate how hard it is to function as a community trying to work together and communicate and how hard communication is.

ezra klein

I love that. That is a great note to end on. C. Thi Nguyen, thank you very much. This was a real pleasure.

c. thi nguyen

Thank you so much. [MUSIC PLAYING]

speaker

"The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Rogé Karma, Annie Galvin and Jeff Geld. Fact-checking by Michelle Harris, original music by Isaac Jones and mixing by Jeff Geld. Our executive producer is Irene Noguchi. Special thanks to Shannon Busta, Kristin Lin and Kristina Samulewski.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Feb. 25, 2022

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When we play Monopoly or basketball, we know we are playing a game. The stakes are low. The rules are silly. The point system is arbitrary. But what if life is full of games — ones with much higher stakes — that we don't even realize we're playing?

According to the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen, games and gamified systems are everywhere in modern life. Social media applies the lure of a points-based scoring system to the complex act of communication. Fitness apps convert the joy and beauty of physical motion into a set of statistics you can monitor. The grades you received in school flatten the qualitative richness of education into a numerical competition. If you've ever consulted the U.S. News & World Report college rankings database, you've witnessed the leaderboard approach to university admissions.

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