



Getting what he deserves

Description

Gamification draws on a narrow understanding of game play: keeping score, leaderboards, rewards, competition, incentives of various kinds. In fact, stripped of ludic graphics and quirky interactions, gamification typically follows processes derived mostly from accounting: the technology of the ledger, or bookkeeping, more specifically double-entry bookkeeping.

Gamification through the ages

By most historical accounts this was the technological innovation by which a monk or merchant would write transactions into a single book, with details, and with separate columns for moneys coming in (credit) and moneys going out (debits).

At the end of the accounting period the merchant or auditor would expect the sum totals at the bottom of the two columns to cancel each other out, or carry forward. It was a highly useful Medieval invention, and became even more important with the spread of global trade and the rise of industrial production.

Scholars such as Walter Ong have argued convincingly that the utility of such ledger methods provided a benchmark for rationality. The ledger renders transactions transparent, able to be scrutinised, following a calculable logic.

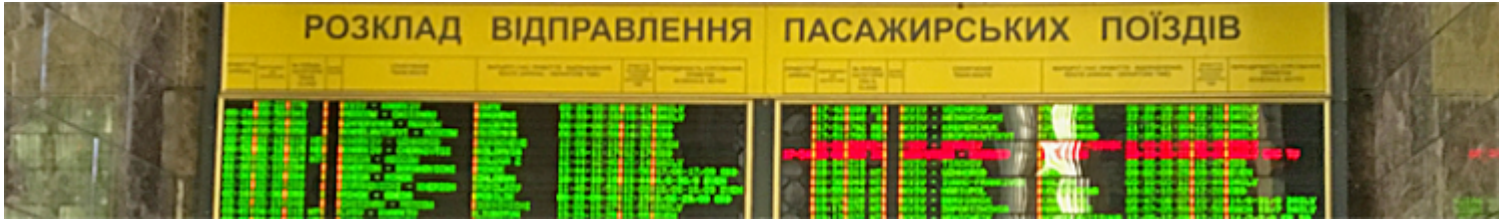
The ledger can also be reproduced, as can the procedure, to give the same result. To see the world through the lens of the accountant's ledger is to see a world conveniently divided into transactional components, classified, compared, weighed, evaluated and eventually balanced — all under the purview of number.

Games and morals

The mechanisms of the ledger give instrumental impetus to ancient ideas equating the procedures of accounting with amassing virtue. Actually, as sinful creatures we are more likely to amass *debts* rather than credits.

The Bible provides several examples of this equation: "on the day I settle accounts, I will hold them accountable for their sin." Exodus 32:34. That reference to accounting reads as more lawyerly than numerical. In this ancient telling, to give an account is simply to explain, to justify, as in a legal case.

But the idea of the ledger does translate into the moral realm. It's but a small step to suggest that you can pay your way out of a tricky moral situation. That was Martin Luther's complaint against indulgences: "as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory." (Article 27 of Luther's 1517 *Ninety Five Theses* against indulgences).



Moral deserts

The idea of the moral ledger runs deep in contemporary thinking, hence, *the theory of moral deserts*. After doing good, especially if it comes with hardship or self-sacrifice, I expect to be rewarded by circumstances — if not immediately then not too far into the future. I deserve some personal benefit that might accrue from my good actions.

Whether of ourselves or others, we think that people who repeatedly do good things should get something good in return. Habitual do-badders should get their just deserts.

Irrespective of whether that belief translates into the everyday lifeworld, it's a recurrent theme in the stories we tell. Other than in the darkest of dramas, the villains in the story get punished (unless redeemed through some twist of fate), and the good guys live happily ever after.

Political games

Polling companies ask a sample of the population a series of questions and publish the results, e.g. Fox News Poll includes interviews with 1,003 randomly chosen registered voters nationwide who spoke with live interviewers on both landlines and cellphones. The poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points for all registered voters.

The results of such polls influence political parties' policies and when they think it safe to proceed with full population votes, referendums and elections. This is politics gamified, with scores, leaderboards, competition, and rewards.

One of the propositions in the recent Fox News poll is "Trump getting what he deserves" at 48% agreement within the sample. So that's a question about *just deserts*. It's proof, if we needed it, that the concept of moral desert has meaning for most people.

See post on [Schadenfreude](#).

Reference

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Note

- Image on this post: It's not a leaderboard, but the arrivals/departure board in the main railway station, Kiev, July 2017 because Ukraine is in the news.

Category

1. Ethics

Tags

1. deserts
2. game
3. morals
4. play
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