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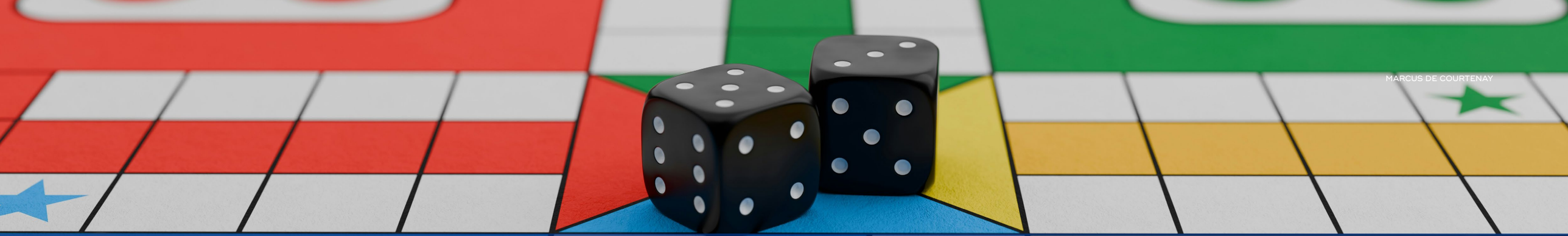

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IS GAMIFICATION REALLY THE FUTURE OF LEARNING DESIGN?

LIFE-CENTRED DESIGN IN LEARNING

BY MARCUS DE COURTENAY

> “ life-centred design is not just what is going to be easy or intuitive for humans to use. It is what is going to be good for life.

Designing learning technologies poses a number of unique challenges. Not only do we need to get the learning approach right, but we also need to optimise the technology.

These systems are required to take everything we’ve come to know about good education—engagement, retention, empowerment—and frame it within an accessible and intuitive technological platform.

As one model for learning technologies puts it, we need to work across not one, but three, critical dimensions in designing these systems:

- **Technological**
- **Pedagogical**
- **Content**

One of the best approaches for achieving this in recent times has been human-centred design.

Human-centred design is thought to have originated at Stanford University’s mechanical engineering department in 1958, and was later popularised by IDEO. The approach emphasised that products and systems should be designed with and for people, rather than imposing technology or solutions onto users. The idea was that empathy for the end-user was central to creating innovative and useful designs.

IDEO, a global design and innovation consultancy, expanded and refined the process into a formalised methodology in the 1990s. IDEO framed human-centred design as a three-phase iterative process:

01 **INSPIRATION:** Deeply understanding the people you’re designing for through observation and empathy.

02 **IDEATION:** Generating a wide range of creative solutions informed by real human insights.

03 **IMPLEMENTATION:** Rapid prototyping, testing, and refining to ensure the solution is practical, scalable, and aligned with user needs.

IDEO’s version of human-centred design aims not just to meet basic functionality, but to *delight* users and solve complex problems in innovative ways, often by revealing unmet or unarticulated needs. Human-centred design helps ensure that solutions are not only technically feasible and economically viable, but also *desirable* for the people they serve.

While this approach to design can be used in any context, there has often been a particular interest in its application to the intersection of humans and technology and designing tech for intuitive use.

It follows then that human-centred design has been an important focus of learning designing. Practitioners have sought to tailor their systems and programs to the end-user through high levels of empathy and understanding of learner goals and interests.

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Problem solved then, right?

Not quite.

ETHICAL LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

While human-centred design has proven highly effective in some ways, there has also seen some concerning ethical developments in this space. Hijacked by economic motives, this methodology has become another way of making money. The infinite scrolling social media feed is a prime example of this. Built using the human-centred design framework, the infinite scroll—while highly intuitive and stimulating to our desires—has become an addictive system.

Organisations need to think more broadly when designing learning. The sole focus cannot be what people are going to *like*. It is important not to only satisfy people's desires, but to create the conditions needed for life to flourish. While education is critical to a flourishing life, we need to consider how we are design learning technologies that are responsible, equitable, effective, and give learner's agency and respect.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has further brought further into focus the ethical dimensions of learning technology. For a long time, people took the view that technology is 'ethically blind'. That is: human inputs determine whether or not a technological system is good or bad. There is nothing inherently moral about technology itself.

We now know that this is false. Technology - according to its design - has an ethical dimension. Technology can encourage humans to take more, or less, ethical actions. With AI this problem is even more complex because, firstly, we don't fully understand how it works (in the sense that we can't always predict its outputs) and, secondly it increasingly has a certain autonomy as well. It is not just a modality but an actor itself.

There are a number of highly useful resources already out there around ethical learning technology. For example, a study of various frameworks for ethical principles in artificial intelligence found the following common elements of concern:

- Governance and stewardship
- Transparency and accountability
- Sustainability and proportionality
- Privacy
- Security and safety
- Inclusiveness
- Human-centred

How many learning and development practitioners who are adopting technologies in organisations, have considered each of these dimensions in the roll out?

LIFE-CENTRED DESIGN

L&D professionals need to adopt a rigorous ethical approach to learning technology. However, we also need technology that is effective, using principles that have come to us from theories like human-centred design.

So then, where do we go from here?

Fortunately, we are starting to gain greater clarity around the next horizon for human-centred design, which is life-centred design. Life-centred design seeks to broaden our compass of considerations.

Building on the effectiveness of human-centred design, life-centred design is not just what is going to be easy or intuitive for humans to use. It is what is going to be good for life.

One immediate consequence of this approach is taking into a broader awareness of the ecosystem in which we operate: our planet. It calls for building systems that acknowledge the environmental impact and effect our actions have on place.

Equally important is shifting the focus from simply fulfilling what people *want* to thoughtfully addressing what they *need*. It is not simply about meeting our basic desires for stimulus, novelty and immediate dopamine-hits. It is about educational technology that uplifts, engages and transforms. That allows us to flourish as living beings.

TO GAMIFY OR NOT?

So, to come back to our original question: is gamification the ideal direction for L&D technologies? We have seen some really encouraging results around learning outcomes and engagement from gamification. This supports its performance as a tool. However, we need to temper this question of effectiveness with other factors.

Is the game ethical? If we design AI systems that make learning platforms more 'addictive', is that truly a positive outcome? Is it ethical for a machine to continuously evolve strategies to keep us engaged or active on a platform? We need to carefully consider the metrics we use to incentivise learning—and whether they align with meaningful, ethical, and lasting outcomes.

These questions are all important considerations as we develop and implement the next era of learning technologies. It is not a black and white question but requires a deep consideration of the competing factors at play.

Most of all, as life-centred design is beginning to show us, we need to ground our learning technology design in a vision of human life that is ever flourishing for the better.

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Marcus is an Executive Coach and Research Analyst at Performance Frontiers. As one of their knowledge leads with a passion for making sense of a complex world, Marcus believes that how we deliver our ideas is intrinsically connected to their meaning for our audience, and he seeks to make that meaning richer and deeper, with every word. As well as his thought leadership, Marcus is a trained strengths coach, supporting clients to achieve their potential. A passionate and lifelong learner, his research interests lie at the intersection of leadership, science and the humanities.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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