

# DOPE LABS

The Gamification of Life – Lab 065

**Zakiya** My thermostat and power bill tell me, like, hey, you know, you're using 20% less electricity than your neighbor. Hmm. And I would always tell people I'm not competitive, but, baby, I want to be number one. Okay? I want to use so little electric. I'm turning the lights off. I'm doing everything they taught us. I'm just shuffling around. I'm like, Oh, is it hot? I will switch into a tank top, okay? I want to use so little electricity that they think this home is vacant.

**Titi** Just so you can win.

**Zakiya** I want to win. I want to win. I'm not ashamed. I want to win.

**Titi** My friend's got the eye of the tiger.

**Zakiya** I want to be the eco-friendly big boss. Okay. How did gamification sneak into my energy use? And why is it taking over my life?

**Titi** I'm Titi.

**Zakiya** And i'm Zakiya.

**Titi** And from Spotify, this is Dope Labs.

**Titi** Welcome to Dope Labs, a weekly podcast that mixes hardcore science, pop culture and a healthy dose of friendship.

**Zakiya** This week we're talking all about gangs. Specifically, we wanted to know more about the nature of games, the gamification of life, and the difference between the two. Because I'm struggling.

**Titi** You play a lot of games, though. I do. You have a lot of games on your phone and you play video games.

**Zakiya** How do you know what's on my phone? Bag back bag back.

**Titi** Cause I know you. I've been knowing you for 45 years.

**Zakiya** It does feel that long. Sometimes I play games. I don't even realize I'm playing games. But, like, crossword puzzles, those are kind of games. They're relaxing for me. Sudoku. Sometimes when I send little notes in the mirror at a Sudoku, if I know people are

game friendly, I know that they're saying you are Sudoku. You don't like puzzles and things like that.

**Titi** No, I don't. like wordle and things like that are okay. But now they have things like wordle Unlimited, where it's like a world that's just never ending. You can play a thousand word games back to back to back. And I say, no way. I can focus my energy for 30 minutes to get this one word. But I'm not trying to keep going and going and going. That's just going to stress me out.

**Zakiya** Yeah. When it's done, it's done.

**Titi** It's done. Go, remove yourself in my eyeballs.

**Zakiya** All right, let's get into the recitation. What do we know, Titi?

**Titi** Well, we know that games have been a part of human life for a very long time.

**Zakiya** Yes, this is not a very long time. But even when I was a kid, when I really reflect, you know, people in my family were playing games, jacks with the ball and the jacks, little dominoes.

**Titi** Yo, that's old school. But you know what I always think of when I think of, like, early, early age sports is the Mayans. So the Mayans had this ball game. Have you ever heard of it?

**Zakiya** No. Tell me.

**Titi** Girl. It's a rubber ball. And the size of the ball is, like, kind of like maybe a baseball size, I think. Okay. And then there's this stone ring that's on a wall, and the object of the game is to try and get it in there. But you can't use your hands, so you have to use other parts of your body and this thing is like really high up. So they're using their backs, they're using their shoulders, they're using their heads. And so that is one of the first sports I think that's been recorded was from the Mayans, which is really cool.

**Zakiya** It really is. I hadn't heard of that before. Wow, and that's really far back. I thought you were going to say chess. Let me tell you something. You didn't want to see me in the third or fourth grade. I had a little board.

**Titi** I know you was hustling people. I know it.

**Zakiya** I have some of my favorite stones I always wanted. Like, I had three or four. I always want to end this one little cut out. Oh, my God. This is making me think of so many games we play growing up. Even hand games.

**Titi** Yes. Down by the river hanky panky-- blah blah from bank to banky.

**Zakiya** How many doctors did it take?

**Titi** Bubble gum bubble gum in a dish.

**Zakiya** Who was making that stuff up and how was it spreading around so fast without social media?

**Titi** It felt like no matter where you were in the country, everybody knew these games.

**Zakiya** How? Go to my cousins go from North Carolina to Georgia to visit them? They know the games. Go visit my cousins up in New Jersey, they know the same hand games. They singing the same nursery rhymes or whatever those things are.

**Titi** How? They're just so embedded in our culture. Game playing, it's a really great way to bond and connect with people. There are also a lot of apps out there then social media and services that have started incorporating games into them. Like the first thing I think of is the Apple Watch.

**Zakiya** Mm hmm.

**Titi** That's a game. You know, it's tracking your steps, it's tracking your exercise, how much you're standing, and sometimes you're just competing with you so you can see what you've been doing for the last month. So it's still a game, but it's just one player. But then also you can link up with other people's apple watches. So then you have a multiplayer game, you can have challenges and all types, stuff like that.

**Zakiya** Yes, my friends, as a competitor, I lose those challenges every time. Kate, from our Metals episode--Kate's closing her rings every day.

**Titi** Okay, well.

**Zakiya** I can't keep up. Okay. You know, so you made a really good point to see that these apps and services are bringing in different elements of gaming like point systems and achievement that unlock. Right. All of those are some of the foundational elements of gaming. But what else do we want to know?

**Titi** I think it would be helpful to know or understand why we play games. I think pretty much everybody feels like they are open to playing games. But why is it that we do play games? What connections are we trying to make?

**Zakiya** Yeah. And then I also think as we see the adoption of gamification, is that the same thing as games? Where do we draw the line between gamification and leveraging certain parts of it? And actually being a game?

**Titi** A game or a trick?

**Zakiya** I feel like that's a great starting point. There's probably so much we don't even know to ask, right?

**Titi** Trick or treat. Let's jump into the dissection.

**Zakiya** Yes, absolutely. Our guest for today's lab is Dr. Thi Nguyen.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** My name is Thi Nguyen. I'm a associate professor of philosophy at University of Utah. I was supposed to be an expert on fairly conventional issues in epistemology and metaethics, like old school questions, like what is knowledge and what is the good? And now I've walked down some weird path where I am a philosophical

expert on games, porn, trusts, transparency metrics, twitter, and weird crap that I think wasn't supposed to be part of my job description.

**Titi** Professor Nguyen's book *Games: Agency as Art*, explores games as a specific and very special type of art form and argues that games are an essential part of our systems of communication and our art.

**Zakiya** We started with the basics and asked Professor Nguyen, what exactly is a game?

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** My favorite definition of the game is from this philosopher Bernard Suits. The book is called *The Grasshopper: Games Life in Utopia*, and he tries to define the game. But the short version is that to play a game is to voluntarily taking on unnecessary obstacles to make possible this activity of struggling.

**Titi** Professor Nguyen says With every game, you have a goal. But what makes it a game is these arbitrary challenges that make achieving that goal more difficult.

**Zakiya** One example is a puzzle. Titi, you hate puzzles.

**Titi** I hate puzzles.

**Zakiya** The end goal is to be able to look at a complete picture. So, if we didn't want to make it a game, we could just buy the picture. Why don't we do that?

**Titi** That's what I do. That's exactly what I do. I just kind of buy a nice picture.

**Zakiya** Well, that's not the point.

**Titi** I guess the point is the obstacles in the picture is cut into a thousand tiny little pieces that we have to, well, not we, that you have to put together in order to see it? Here's another example.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** So, in basketball, the goal is to pass the ball through the hoop. But it's not just passing the ball through the hoop, because if that was valuable, you would just go to a basketball court by yourself with a stepladder at midnight and just instantly do it. It's not valuable unless it was done under certain constraints.

**Zakiya** Yes. So, adding an opposing team who's also trying to score, adding a clock, all of those things, those are additional obstacles that make it a game.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** That must mean that the value of the activity, whatever it is, has to lie in the character of the struggle and not just get in the stuff at the end.

**Titi** Yes, the struggle is real and the struggle is fun, according to Thi.

**Zakiya** But that's not the only value games have. Professor Nguyen says that we're also drawn to games because they give us something specific to focus on for a finite amount of time.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** What games are for me are sculpted activities. The game designer is setting the goals and then giving you a set of abilities. The amazing part of a game is that you know what you're doing and for a little bit of time you just pay attention to that. When

I'm rock climbing, I'm just paying attention to the rock. When I'm playing one of my absurd, stupid, complex German board games, I'm just paying attention to the economic status of my railway investments. It's so pure and so clear. For those of us that have trouble having moments of purity and focus. Because the world is like this, that's like vomiting on you all the time. That purity is magical, and it's also in games safe because games are temporary and set aside for the rest of the world. You can focus intensely because you're in a little artificial space that's going to end.

**Titi** And in fact, a 2019 study talks about the psychological benefits of playing board games. It links playing them to a decrease in depression and an increase in healthy behavior modifications like healthier eating, quitting smoking and safe sex.

**Zakiya** And there are even more benefits to game playing. Games create connection between people. In his book, Professor Nguyen actually argues that games are a special technique for communication.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** One of the neat things about games is because they're such tight, constrained spaces that they create this weird intimacy. I mean, I think some of the most intimate I've been with another person's mind is playing chess against them. You're like, in each other's mind. And that's possible because the goals are so narrow and the space of possible moves is so narrow. And so because of that artificiality, you get both the pleasure of life, clarity of action and purpose, and then the pleasure of like near telepathy, which I think you get in Wordle, right?

**Titi** Wordle, okay. If you don't know a Wordle is, I don't think you have access to technology or something, like you have not been on the internet because Wordle has taken the world by storm. So it was created in October of 2021 and it gained the largest amount of its popularity in December of 2021. But people are still playing word today. The premise is there is one word, just one word, a five letter word each day, and you have to figure out what that word is. And with every guess, you get clues based on the letters that you chose, and then you get six tries and your goal is to get the word before the six tries run out. Everyone is playing wordle. Or if you've seen those green squares, yellow squares, that's what it is.

**Zakiya** I remember posting word on January 9th.

**Titi** And I had no clue what was at that point.

**Zakiya** I sent it to somebody and they sent a question mark back. And when I posted it on Instagram, yeah, a lot of people were saying they didn't know it, only maybe two or three people knew what Wordle was. They knew what my squares were.

**Titi** Now, there's so many new iterations, there's Wordle, there's Squirtle, there's Nerdle, there's Worldle, there's hurdle, so many different types.

**Zakiya** Professor Nguyen actually wrote this Twitter thread about what made the world so successful. And that thread went viral.

**Titi** He says, when you first play Wordplay, your first thought is, Wait, you just guess. But slowly, you realize you have more agency than you thought with clues about letter possibility and letter frequency of each word. So, the experience is about discovering this power you didn't know you had in all the agency that comes with it.

**Zakiya** But the social part of wrote all that professor away and talked about is what he says really sets it apart. Specifically, the graphic design of that shareable world chart. I know, I know you have seen that in one of your feeds, if not on Twitter, on Instagram, on Facebook. You've seen it somewhere.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** Because of the graphic design. You get to see someone else's general journey like in a second. I think actually the cool thing about Wardle is you can look and you be like, Oh, you were crappaf there, weren't you? And then you pulled it out. How long did it take you? Between line four and five? You can just see it.

**Zakiya** And so once you get this definition of what a game is like, this end goal, that would be completely possible and doable if you didn't have all of these obstacles that are basically artificial in the way. Right.

**Titi** Yeah.

**Zakiya** When you start thinking about that, you really realize that like we kind of grew up within a culture of games.

**Titi** Absolutely.

**Zakiya** I can remember playing canasta after school with teachers of afterschool programs.

**Titi** Yeah, in high school we were playing skip bo, we were playing UNO, we were playing all types of card games.

**Zakiya** And it really makes me think about video games and the portrayal of video gamers in mainstream media. But if you were to ask most people, they probably wouldn't say they consider themselves gamers.

**Titi** Right. But based on what we've learned from Professor Nguyen so far, we might all be gamers.

**Zakiya** Oh, feels like it.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** I think there's this weird, weird inattention to playing games. And despite the fact that it's one of the oldest, most central parts of human culture, from my perspective now, it seems totally weird that the history, at least of Western European philosophy, who spent so much time working on society, ethics, the meaning of life, what counts as a good life, and the shelf of stuff about games in play is almost nonexistent. Like, how did we get to the point we thought we could understand humanity without this stuff?

**Zakiya** So, according to Professor Thi, not only are games a central part of human life, and not only is it possible that we're all really gamers, but he kind of proposes that games could actually be the meaning of life.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** Bird suits at the end of his book has this funky argument that always pisses my students off where he says, Imagine Utopia, where you use technology to solve all our problems. What would we do all day? We'd either play games or be bored out of our minds. So games must be the purpose of life.

**Titi** And Dr. Nguyen is not the first person to think about this in this way. It actually goes all the way back to Aristotle.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** Aristotle thought that the value in human life was not that you made, but good quality activity. So another way to put it is the meaning of life must be an activity that is valuable in and of itself. The phosphorus truth of this that is autotelic activity, activity that's valuable not to get something else, but in the doing itself. And I think it's fair to say, what is the ultimate autotelic activity? It's freaking games. That is the struggle that you choose for its own sake.

**Zakiya** Well, if we accept this, that games are the meaning of life and you know, it is the activity for activity sake, then they must be pretty valuable, right? Like if this is what we're all doing, if that's what the big picture is, how do we capture the value of games? And that's something Professor Nguyen talks about in his book, thinking of games as like an art form.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** One of my suspicions is, until lately, it was much easier to sell a painting than sell a game. If you think the painting is beautiful in use by the painting, I think if you think what's beautiful in the game is your experience of doing it, that's not as transferable between people, right? That's something that's going to vary from player to player.

**Titi** What's cool about thinking about games as art is that it's art that we are active participants in looking at a painting isn't as active as playing a game.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** There's this obsession with art objects that are stable that is like the painting is the same for everyone. But true games are not stable because people are free during them. And the really remarkable thing about games is that you're free in games and what you do becomes beautiful in idea interaction between you and the design of the game. But that's not as easily salable.

**Zakiya** So what is really saying is that games are art, okay? And not even that basic stable art that you all like to say you really love. Games are a dynamic art that are unique in experience for each person designed with your agency of mind, this art that's created for players to move through and have their own interaction.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** For example, tabletop role playing like Dungeons and Dragons often gets denigrated as a very statically low. And if you read describing in a certain way, here's an activity where people who are largely passive and who otherwise might be sitting around watching the crappiest Netflix show that repeats the same stories and not, you know, digesting it are sitting together, inventing new stories on the fly. And then somehow this becomes like the lowest part of culture. Like it's it's just weird. And, like, now I'm just looking for an explanation for why this stuff has been, like, excluded from being at the core of what we do.

**Titi** This way of thinking is not something that I do often. I just don't think like this. But now, listening to Professor Nguyen, I'm like life is game. Life is games. Every part of life you can look at it as a game.

**Zakiya** I don't know. It feels like the short of it is you thought it was one way, but it's another. Like like you're looking around and seeing game-like activity everywhere. It does make you start to ask some questions like, is everything a game? Was the matrix for real?

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** I don't think everything is a game. The suited definition is that games are voluntary. You have to choose to take them up. And so game like systems that are forced on you, we have to engage in them to survive. The systems where the points are associated with, I don't know, eating or having a good job that doesn't have the kind of ideal structure I'm talking about where you freely choose a goal and a game for the joy of the struggle. It's unsurprising if you see game like activity everywhere. I don't think that's because games are everywhere. I think it's because games are a crystallization of everyday activity. John Dewey, the great American philosopher, said that every art form was the crystallization of something we do in normal life, like painting or the crystallization of seeing in fiction as a crystallization of telling each other. It happened in our day, and games are the crystallization of doing the crystallization of action. And a lot of the times we play games because once in a while in life we get to have beautiful, interesting, rich action. But most of the time in our life, the actions are crap.

**Zakiya** All right. So whether your life right now is rich in action or feeling like it's full of crap, we're going to take a break. And when we get back, we'll dive into game design. The gamification of everything from money to exercise to drinking water to flossing.

**Titi** We're back. And before we dove back in the games and the literal meaning of life, let's tee up next week's lab.

**Zakiya** It's almost June. And that means it's pride month. Next week, we're going to be hearing from members of the LGBTQIA plus in STEM community. So be sure to check that lab out. You don't want to miss it.

**Titi** Okay. Back to talking about games with Professor Thi Nguyen. We've been talking about what games are, why we like playing them. Now let's talk about the people who are actually designing them. There's a lot of thought that goes into creating a good game, including thinking about a player's behavior when you're designing a game. You have to account for the freedom of the players and create space for them to have agency.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** The things in the world, the game designers the closest to is actually making governments and making cities. But these are sets of rules or constraints that transform people's actions inside them while still trying to leave them substantially free.

**Zakiya** So aside from the actual design, the colors, what the interface is like and the graphics look like all of that. You're also thinking about how people might or might not engage with the game and all of the different scenarios that can happen from that.

**Titi** There's also figuring out the goal of the game.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** So I have a particular favorite game center. It's Reiner Knizia. He's the Mozart of German game designers. He says, Yeah. So the most important thing in my toolbox is the point system, because the point system tells the players what to care about during the game. It sets their desires. You literally just open up the rulebook and it tells you what to desire and you just do it.

**Zakiya** This makes so much sense. Yes. If I download a game and I'm playing and I feel like I can't get enough points or I have to watch too many ads to get points, I'm out.



**Titi** So one of the types of games that I like to have on my phone is like restaurant games. And I'll download a restaurant game. And if the point is to just make the food and that's how you get points, that's boring to me. I want customers to have a timer over their heads. And you lose points. If they've had to wait for a longer than 15 minutes to order longer than 20 minutes to get their food. Like, I want those types of points. So I will decide based on how the points are given out, whether or not I'm going to engage with a game.

**Zakiya** Because it's telling you what to value. Right. I don't want to just value making the food. I want a more complex world. I want to have to consider emotions. I want to have of how much time is taken for my customer.

**Titi** What does that say about me?

**Zakiya** Now, I don't want to get into all of that. Let's skip over that. It's another episode. I'll talk to my therapist about it.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** People will say things like game designers tell stories or game designers create worlds, and I think that's actually underselling the issue. Game designers create alternate selves for you, which have alternate abilities, but specifically alternate desires. And the true heart of gameplay is manipulating the desires and the abilities and the obstacles of the environment so that together action that is likely to be awesome, beautiful, funny, thrilling, dramatic, even though you're free in that designed space. I mean, that I think is the true heart of game design.

**Zakiya** So if games are the crystallization of everyday life, then the question I'm immediately asking is do people typically gravitate towards games with goals and desires that are secretly like baked inside? You know, like, do you really want to be a restaurant owner? Yeah, I don't think so.

**Titi** I hate cooking for myself. I'm just going to Zakiya house.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** I think a lot of times games let you indulge or explore desire sets. You don't have it all. Like with literature, I think some people just like the literature where they recognize the character themselves. But a lot of us like literature because we get to explore completely different personas and styles. Since every game records a different kind of agency, you can explore totally, wildly different agencies from using games, and you can just use them to explore. What's it like to be a total Machiavellian? What's it like to be a perfect member of a team that is like like you can explore all these different things through games.

**Titi** Now that we've talked all about games, let's get into the idea of the gamification of life, like what you were talking about zakiya earlier on with your light bill and wanting to win in your neighborhood. But when we say gamification, okay, what do we actually mean?

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** It's any procedure where you take techniques from game design and you export them to ordinary life activities to make those more like a game in some way.

**Zakiya** And we've talked about gamification in different capacities in a few different labs. Lab 049, where we talk about the habit equation and, you know, just filling out habit trackers, lab 040 Money Moves. When we talked about some of the latest in fintech and then even in lab 037 In Denial.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** There's also an even bigger thing that I really care about that's kind of being the gamification, which is all of these cases in which metrofied systems and clear rankings get into our life and then suddenly like they just take over and we get really excited to get points by whatever point systems that is, which includes three point average and citation rates and clicks and all the other stuff by which our achievements are measured, ranked and immediately fed back to us as evaluations of how successful we are as human beings.

**Zakiya** Yes, that's what your light bill is doing, even in your car. All of these little readouts everywhere.

**Titi** Yeah. Even like on your phone, every new update, I feel like it's more gamification where it's like, Oh, how much screen time did you have? And just making you aware of these numbers, like the awareness of the numbers. I feel like innately we start to evaluate ourselves and say, maybe I should do less. And then you compare yourself, you know, week to week or like we were talking about earlier with the Apple Watch. where that gamified your exercise? So on an Apple Watch, it tracks your heart rate. It lets you check your text messages, let you check your email. But it also is recording your steps. It'll record if you exercise. And based on your settings, you can say, oh, I want to take, you know, a thousand steps in a day. And if you get to those thousand steps, it closes that ring. And if you say, I want to do 30 minutes of exercise every day, once you hit 30 minutes of what your Apple Watch sees as exercise, it closes that ring. And so each day you can see how much of your ring you completed and if you closed it or not. So it's kind of a thing where you can look back over the week, over the month, over the last year and see how many times you closed your rings. And so, you know, we talked about it in the habits episode where maybe that might not be such a good thing for some people because it's not a really great motivator. But for others, you know, the gamification of their health and wellness works.

**Zakiya** So when we say gamification, it sounds like we are pulling some elements of games. But is it technically a game because I am struggling to become number one? Okay. It is hard to keep my electric use that.

**Titi** Oh my goodness.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** There are a lot of differences. But one of the key differences for me is that in a true game, the points are something that, you know, is just there to get you through an interesting struggle. And in gamification, the points are somehow this sick motivation to get you to do something that you detest and find miserable or awful.

**Zakiya** Another point to think about where we've talked about gamification in the past and it's kind of the maybe not so positive version that Professor Nguyen is talking about is in the add to cart episode where Christopher Mims told us about what they call scientific management, where they were going through and looking at productivity. Right. We're still seeing that. The gamification. I keep your mouse moving. Oh, are you still there?

**Titi** Such a good point.

**Zakiya** We're seeing it of work. That's something I detest. Okay. And you're trying to make me do it with stars.

**Titi** This performance evaluation at the end of the year. Keep it. You can have it.

**Zakiya** Another big difference between games and gamification is that a game has a pure set of goals that you're trying to achieve within a finite amount of time. Whereas this gamification like, Hey, did you go to work five days in a row, get 2 hours off in the next two week block is infinite and sprawling.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** And I think that is the major difference between games and gamification. Games end and then you step back from those narrow goals. Gamification don't end. You're in them forever. And those goals often aren't secluded, but set over something like tweeting.

**Titi** Yeah. I mean, the gamification of social media likes retweets, reposts, shares, all of that is gamification. And lots of people feel bound by those shares likes and all those things like that. And so what Professor Nguyen is saying makes so much sense, because social media is so much a part of our day to day lives. And a lot of people don't feel like they can take a break from that. And so they're constantly participating in these games that aren't games, that aren't the good type of games.

**Zakiya** Tying that artificial value. Professor Nguyen has done some extensive writing around Twitter, including a paper called How Twitter Gamified Communication, where he proposes Twitter's use of artificial goals such as likes follows and retweets are not necessarily increasing our motivation to actually communicate with each other, but more so just to score points.

**Titi** So, folks are just more so trying to be viral than trying to say something that actually has meaning.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** Think about all the rich values that you might have in communication. Twitter doesn't measure those. Twitter measures likes retweets and followers, which are basically a popularity measure. And the reason is partially because at institutional mass scale, we don't have the technology to measure empathy, understanding, transformation. What we have is the ability to measure likes. Similarly, Fitbit can't measure whether you're at peace through the exercise or whether it's esthetic or feel like you measure steps.

**Titi** So it really feels like gamification is everywhere. Why is it so pervasive in modern culture? Why are we so different from the cavemen?

**Zakiya** Hmm. They probably were keeping the scores.

**Titi** They had to.

**Zakiya** When did they go from a bunch of lines to four and then a diagonal line?

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** I think a lot of the other reasons aren't overt gamification. A lot of them have to do with the need for processing information at a large scale. And a lot of the things that now look like metrics that gamify our lives start their lives as attempts to keep track of and monitor complex situations, often for really good reasons.

**Zakiya** An example Professor Nguyen gives here is diversity and inclusion initiatives, which he's been involved in. And he says they try to address this huge problem of a lack of diversity by starting with simple metrics counting the number of women, people of color, etc. in corporations, and how having a simplified quota can actually hurt those efforts.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** My intellectual obsession is why we respond so intensely to the presence of rankings and points. In the negative side of it is we can capture whole institutions and people and get them to do exactly what we want by tying it to a ranking system and just putting that ranking system everywhere. But we love this. It's like really, really well-documented the degree to which we as human beings just instantly respond and orient around any available, clarified ranking, even when we know in our hearts that ranking doesn't track what really matters.

**Zakiya** And so we really have to ask, is this gamification of everything? Is it a good thing? You know, like there are some places where it feels good to have it in your life? I think that's good for me. I see those rings closing. Yeah, but for some people, it is daunting to be like, Oh, I have to close this entire ring today.

**Titi** Right. Right.

**Zakiya** You know. And the other part is, sometimes the ring is not even the right metric. It's like, do I feel strong today? Do I feel good today?

**Titi** Right. You might have worked out really hard the day before. And so today might be a rest day and your Apple Watch telling you, hey, get up. You're like, nah, yes, I crashed yesterday.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** Notice that part of what makes games so sexy is that they are a brief moment where you know exactly what you're doing because there's this artificially clear point system which is pleasurable precisely because it's clearer than the nauseating complexity of ordinary life.

**Zakiya** A word. Hmm. What are we doing here? Why is it so complex? Why isn't it clear? And where are the rings?

**Titi** Yeah. Imagine. Imagine that if you move through life.

**Zakiya** There, there's some rings over there. I've got to go that way.

**Titi** Right. Like, just tell me which way to go. I'm Sonic. I'm just out here looking for rings.

**Dr. Thi Nguyen** So, a lot of gamification's, I think, are offering you this trade where they're like, hey, you can have the pleasure of a game in ordinary life. All you need to do is take a real world activity and orient your motivations around a simple, pre-produced, technologically embedded point system. And then you'll get thrills.

**Zakiya** Oh, it doesn't sound so fair when he breaks it down like this. I'm still trying to be number one, though. My energy use is going low, low, low.

**Titi** All right. It's time for one thing. And this week's One Thing is special because of this episode. We're going to talk about our favorite game right now.

**Zakiya** Okay. So one of them is a crossword book. That's my analog game. Analog. It's my crossword puzzle. But I think my one game right now that I'm really enjoying is Farming Simulator 2019. If you want to upgrade me, I'll give you my you know, I give you my X-Box name. But right now I am really enjoying playing that game. I'm learning about a lot of

farming equipment. I have a lot of respect for people that are driving big equipment on regular roads. I'm crashing a lot. I'm doing contract work on other farms, I'm spreading lime. I'm doing all kinds of stuff that I didn't even know I needed to do to maintain the health of my farm.

**Titi** What's your favorite crop?

**Zakiya** Right now, it's soybeans and they were selling high.

**Titi** Oh, you got to sell it too?

**Zakiya** You can sell it. It's a lot of stuff in there. You can lease equipment. I'm learning about all these different manufacturers. So much stuff. It's really cool. What's your favorite game?

**Titi** My favorite game is a game that I started playing during the pandemic. It's a board game. So me and Jimmy have played this game a number of times. It is called pandemic. Oh, it sounds insensitive, but this game was created a while ago. I heard about it from someone else and I was like, okay, this might be a really interesting game to play, give us some perspective because this was early 2020. You know, we didn't really know much. And you see the entire world and it has these city centers. You draw cards to figure out what your job is and depending on your job, you can make specific moves. So there's a pandemic, but you're trying to control outbreaks.

**Zakiya** Okay.

**Titi** And so you're going to different countries dropping off medicine and vaccines.

**Zakiya** Also, you're doing aid work. Yeah, you're doing it all in this game.

**Titi** You're a reporter. Then you have the ability to inform people about what's going on. It's very involved and we've been playing it with just two people. But you can play 2 to 4 players. It is a lot of fun. It takes time because you have to really strategize with your team to figure out how to stop this pandemic. And we've lost so many times and it is always heartbreaking.

**Zakiya** You lose as a team.

**Titi** You lose as a team. The whole thing is team based. So if one loses, we all lose it. And so it is drama filled, very drama filled, but is a really great game that makes you think a lot.

**Zakiya** It sounds like it. That's it for lab 065. And we want to hear from you. Do you consider yourself a gamer? If you do, what games do you play? What type of games do you play? Are you playing games on your phone? Are you going to delete all your game apps after this? Call us at 2025677028 and tell us what you thought. Also, you can give us an idea for a lab you think we should do this semester too? Don't forget, you can text or call us at 2025677028.

**Titi** And don't forget that there is so much more to dig into on our website. There'll be a cheat sheet for today's lab, additional links and resources in the show notes. Plus, you can sign up for our newsletter. Check it out at [dopelabspodcast.co](http://dopelabspodcast.co). Special thanks to today's guest expert C.Thi nguyen.

**Zakiya** You can find or follow him on Twitter @add\_hawk or you can read more of his work in his book games agency, his art.

**Titi** You can find us on Twitter and Instagram @DopeLabspodcast.

**Zakiya** And Titi's on Twitter and Instagram @dr\_tsho.

**Titi** You can find Zakiya on Twitter and Instagram @zsaidso. Dope Labs is a Spotify original production from MEGAOHM Media Group.

**Zakiya** Our producers are Jenny Radelet Mast and Lydia Smith of Wave Runner Studios.

**Titi** Editing and Sound Design by Rob Marczak.

**Zakiya** Mixing by Hannis Brown.

**Titi** Original Music composed and produced by Taka Yasuzawa and AlexSugiura from Spotify. Creative producers Candice Manriquez Wrenn and Corinne Gilliard. Special thanks to Shirley Ramos, Yasmeen Afifi, Kimu Elolia, Teal Kratky and Brian Marquis.

**Zakiya** Executive producers for MegaOhm Media Group are us.

**Titi** Titi Shodiya.

**Zakiya** And Zakiya Watley.