

Tuesday, January 19th, 2021

Orion A. Webster

Essay #2: Skill-Gap, Meritocracy, Self-expression and Fairness

Coming from the perspective of someone who has explored many different and often disparate disciplines, something that I think about a lot is what, if anything, connects the many different interests that I have? What is the common thread between all of the different things that I have explored or am interested in exploring? From my observations of myself and my introspection I think that the answer is something like I look for activities that are high skill, low luck and things that tend to scale with creativity and not with volume. All of those things being present together is important for me because not only do I enjoy inventing my own approach to things and being able to find creative solutions to different and perhaps esoteric or niche situations, but I like progress to be tied essentially to how competent I actually am at the "game" in question, and be modulated by the quality of my thinking and not simply by hours in. All of that said what is the connection between all of things that I have raised in the title of this piece? How are skill-gap, merit, self-expression and fairness linked in my mind?

Given my preferences, and of course love of a good time, video games are something that I have been a fan of for really the entirety of my life. One game that I've re-fallen in love with is an old gem from 2001, *"Super Smash Bros. Melee"* for the Nintendo Gamecube. As many people who game may be aware, Melee and Smash despite their party game nature often have very high skill ceilings and offer players a lot of different mechanics and things to play around with and think about. Melee is not an exception to this, but out of all of the smash games that have been, melee is not only probably the deepest among them, and holder of the highest player requirements, but also has a beautiful aspect of being able to invent how one plays the game and or how one approaches different characters. Melee, for those unaware, is essentially a platform fighting game, meaning it has the elements one might expect from a Street Fighter or Tekken and also weirdly elements from the Mario games of jumping from different platforms and moving around stages, as well as an "offstage" element. Yes, I realize that Street Fighter and Tekken are not perfect analogies for melee by any means, but they get us in the right direction. However the important part is not what genre of game Melee is, or other things that I've fallen in love with, such as writing or art, or coding to an extent, but the nature of these "games". While Melee is really a kind of perfect storm with the convergence of good design, and wacky elements that just sort of worked out, the strangest thing is that the competitive community of Melee still lives and thrives in the current day, and due to recent changes has become a larger scene that it has

probably ever been in it's 20 year history.

Now of course the next logical question is why am I talking about video games or a 20 year old game in a discussion about complicated issues like skill-gap or fairness and the like? Essentially, I think that games, quite literally in this case, can actually provide useful and yet less emotionally charged analogies for things in the real world, such as the economy or culture and what have you. As many are likely aware, there has been much talk about economic inequality, meritocracy, and fairness and the like in American culture and elsewhere, and I think that something like Melee provides us with a good test case for thinking about some of these issues. My reasoning is because the questions of skill requirements and luck, or merit and fairness as well as self-expression or freedom are all things that Melee actually grapples with. It's common in anything for people to moan on about talent or early advantages or genes, and luck or skill, merit and fairness and so on, and all of these things map on not only to the economy or to capitalism and meritocracy but also onto Melee. I suppose the argument that I wanna make here is that part of the reason why I think melee has lasted so long, despite the incredible lack of financial backing for the scene, is not only the strong grassroots family of Melee and to an extent smash in general, although only Melee has been played like this for 20 years, it's that players can still get better, the meta is not settled and there is more self-expression to do or "more Melee to play" as they say. Much like writing or painting, we don't do it merely for some shot at being big or rich and famous, but because these practices themselves allow us to express ourselves endlessly in a way that is seemingly unsatisfiable or imperfectable. The pursuit of greater heights and the prospect of exploring uncharted territory moves us to keep putting pen, pencil or brush to paper or canvas, and thumb to controller, or brain to complicated games of business or investing. The reality that there is always more to know, further to push, relationships to be built and more depth to reach is the beauty of Melee and free markets and the many things I've mentioned.

Again what does all of this have to do with the topics of the title you may be wondering? I want to make the case for why I've chosen to connect these specific elements a bit more salient to be sure, so allow me to attempt that. For starters, the problem with systems or policies that seek to in many cases arbitrarily close the wealth gap, or redistribute wealth or reduce inequality is that not only are we tending to look myopically at outcome and not inputs, but we fail to talk about the downsides of such policies. To reduce the inequality in something either you have to buff all the characters at the bottom of the tier list, or all the people towards the bottom of a hierarchy, which I think we have no idea how to do, or you nerf the few at the top in an attempt to improve the optics of the situation. In other words, taxing Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates more on

investment in some way that would be fair and reasonable may be totally warranted, but doing this does not magically improve the economic standing nor the life quality of people at the bottom. Those are two distinct problems, related to an extent though they may be. My issue here is that because these issues are so complicated rather than admit we haven't figured out precisely how to allocate money or wisdom such that people towards the bottom of the pyramid really get pulled up, meaning we raise the economic or life quality floor let's say, we instead weave stories and mislead people to believe that higher taxes for the upper echelons of society would quickly "fix" the problem. Why do I think this is an important observation? I think it's important to note that much of what is captured by a high skill gap and high skill ceiling and often a low skill floor is also the framework for the most interesting and expressive activities we have available to us. Take a game like tic-tac-toe. The game may have some complicated element of mind games that is totally worth appreciating, and even some interesting meta to talk about, but ultimately the total degrees of freedom and expression are fairly limited. This is what one might refer to as a low skill, and low luck game. As an aside, if you've heard this phrasing around skill and luck at points prior to this essay that is because this framework by no means originates with me.

Moving on, what exactly am I suggesting as an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between skill gaps or inequality, meritocracy and fairness? It may seem that I've weaved around the issue a bit, but I'm trying to provide a reasonable amount of context for what exactly I'm thinking about. To illustrate further the current problem of how we think about merit and fairness with regards to these things, one issue I think stems from our focus on unequal outcomes versus unequal access to opportunity. Access to opportunity I've realized is actually really prudent phrasing, because the American dream of a meritocratic system, makes no promises that everyone starts off in the same place, but instead holds claim to the idea that anyone from any walk of life has a chance, provided they produce the necessary inputs, to achieve self-actualization. This is distinct from claiming that everyone will have the same starting amount of money, or educational availability, or values and culture or what have you, and in fact these differences in beginnings are things that we used to celebrate openly. In an attempt to appreciate that a troubling amount of inequality can crop up despite a society with access to opportunity and an attempted meritocracy, we have decided to care more and more about the starting points of the players. While I view this to be totally warranted or perhaps logical, we have given little appreciation to everything that happens in between including not just what individuals affect in their journeys but also what part the systems play in all of this. I think that the most horrific part of our current norms around the topics under discussion is that to point a magnifying glass at the

inputs and attitudes of people, or the dysfunction of things such as the education system or healthcare system, has become the territory of a seemingly shrinking body of free thinking and outspoken people, some great and some quite the opposite.

Another point worth raising, is why might it be viewed as toxic to question the integrity of someone who "did not succeed" or isn't as good as they would like to be? I think part of the reason is that the discussion focuses incorrectly on how hard people work when the level of struggle put into to something does not automatically mean that you have an optimized process. As I've written about elsewhere, it may be the case that talent and especially early developmental stuff or genes influence ability on many levels, but the idea that anyone can easily sort out the extent to which those things are responsible for success versus the things within that individuals control strikes me as rather preposterous. Additionally it's not always clear how talented or not someone is until they have put in a tremendous amount to achieve their goals. Many of the recognizable names in any field from sports to science did not come out of the womb better at math or basketball than you. Their parents may have read more books to them as a small child, and they might be taller or naturally "built better" than you, but this accounts for a difference that is likely surmountable. If we were in fact all perfectly optimized at everything we might be able to tell what amount talent accounts for, but I sense that we have so much left to improve upon that anyone who changes the way they approach a game, in a way that is radically superior in process to someone with more natural advantages can still overcome these differences. Taking us back to Melee, for those that play it, imagine for a moment how the landscape and meta would be different if the game had received patches nerfing characters like Marth or Fox and buffing characters like Mario or Pikachu? While the game may have still lived on, at a certain point it's not obvious how much tampering, if any, is actually good for a game, and if it encourages or allows players to dig deeper, or simply have every other set of "jons" accompanied by some balance patch. Now imagine again, that the best players simply by virtue of being competent, were assigned a level of privilege that warranted them to have much steeper requirements to progressing in or winning a tournament? This may sound absurd and this is not intended to be a perfect analogy for current life issues, but what exactly would this demonstrate? The players that may then win, may not be strictly better, but would merely have lesser and somewhat arbitrary requirements to succeed. The point is we may create the illusion that more players are capable of winning tournaments, and that the top of a hierarchy is some inclusive, happy place just anyone who works hard can get to, even if they don't work smart, but we would no longer really be determining who the best tournament performer or best player is.

To make the point a bit sharper, it's true we can change the rules on certain people, or add in a second hierarchy of privilege to change the way things look, but we change little of the facts of competence. What we do often end up with, is a system that actively restricts improvement by placing an unhealthy level of concern on the race, or identity or the privilege level of the players at various levels of the hierarchy optically, but care not at all about why they are there. Of course I understand that essentially all of these problems come down to optics. It's not that Jeff Bezos implicitly hurts people who are poorer than him by commanding vast amounts of wealth, it's that the difference seems alarming or scary when you look solely at differences in net worth between him and the lower end of the economic ladder. Having said that, my feeling is that in order to have a discussion about how we can understand the relationship between all the titular topics, we need to recognize that all of our concern about how "so-and-so" got to an outcome should likely be steeped in a plan to help lift them out of their struggle if possible. Many people wrongly assume that the only reason you would want to know why blacks have smaller net worths than whites in America on average, is that you are interested in reading into that some hardware difference rather than one of software, or something we can help address. In other words, we are fucking ourselves because we are terrified to tell the overweight diabetic that the 5 snickers bars a day may not be helping their blood sugar, and instead would rather give them drugs they may not need to avoid a hard conversation and of course make money. That may sound strong, but if it is the case that something in a Black household, or Hispanic, or Asian or White, or what have you is wrong and creates bad outcomes, we should be willing to help sort these things out, not make claims of inferiority or anything else stupid.

Bringing all of this gobbly-goop of an essay together, what I'm trying to say is that things are often far more complex than we pretend, and mostly we shirk problem solving for the much easier temporary solutions of band-aids not because we think they are fundamental solutions but because we are scared to talk to each other. It's not an attack on your identity if someone points out that you are a slow runner because you don't deadlift. It doesn't matter how hard you work if you do it in the wrong context and with a shitty process. To ask to change the rules of the game to benefit oneself or bad performers in the game should accompany a long, serious and thorough analysis of as much good data as we can muster, it can't be based merely on feelings or happen on the spur of the moment. To seriously suggest that Marth was too overpowered week 1 of playing Melee would have been preposterous, and even 20 years in to make such a claim without knowing the counterplay, or having a good, honest look at the data, would be similarly ill-advised. Essentially the crux of what I am saying is that self-expression and merit are things that only manifest in systems where the rules are as fair as

possible to everyone otherwise it's a game of favoritism. Additionally, though I've likely made this clear enough, to reduce the difference between the ceiling and the floor of a game, generally requires that you lower a barrier, and while this may not be bad per se, typically it costs some amount of skill or self-expression. Lowering inequality optically in other words, generally lowers the skill required to do something, and/or the skill someone can put into something. This lowers the expression and the innovation possible and reduces the quality of outputs created by the game or framework. This tradeoff may be unavoidable, perhaps not, but I think we should recognize it exists and be very careful when thinking about changing balance, and changing rules around. We have to be able to ask and answer honestly the questions of what effects the things that we do have, if we want to make things better and not worse. There are countless examples of this, and I could probably wax on about how making college free-er or letting more people into whatever program, may not have the positive effect we want because it would reduce the quality of whatever these systems produce, but I think such observations are easily reachable from the principles and ideas that I've shared here. None of this is to say we shouldn't make changes or even tax the rich more or anything else, but an approach of buffing the skill floor in ways that are not zero-sum, or with little downside or cost, and letting the top soar even further, rather than merely capping all of our progress, strikes me as a better way of looking at all of this. This matter is not settled by any means and these are just some ideas, but I would urge anyone reading this to think carefully about changing complex systems, because the outcomes of that can be incredibly hard to predict.