

Game-playing in crowdsourced low-skill employment

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This article is a derivative of an ethnographic study of crowdworkers, specifically, people who work on Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), called turkers. On AMT, hundreds and thousands of low-skilled tasks, called HITs, are available everyday for turkers to work on. During our study, we came across turkers who earned their incomes by playing and testing games on their computers or mobile phones. I am interested in bringing out the perspective of these ‘players’, their motivations for ‘play’ and the values they attached to it.

Researchers have surveyed turkers and established that their top motivation was generally working for ‘money’. Turkers enjoyed playing games, and thought it was better than doing nothing or watching television; and even better if they can make money while playing. Many turkers used the word ‘game’ for any task requiring some cognitive work, working against a timer. A housewife from Mumbai explains her favourite task: *“I used to play.. that is we have to digging something or oil – we have to locate places where oil is available on the map, he used to give us good bonus. [...] sometimes there is a game which we play with two players. are you willing to allocate, suppose you have 10 dollars, how much do you want to give to the other person. On the basis of our decision-making – these are called decision-making games – we get bonus.”*

Such games made turkers think, solve a problem, look for information; they associated such tasks with learning something new, like in the anecdote below, where the turker thought that she got the chance to keep up-to-date with the world’s affairs because the work required her to. *“**Nidhi:** I often feel the research I do before I write offers a lot of learning. I happen to know what happens in China or maybe what might actually go wrong, what is the latest discussion. I just want to have a general knowledge of whats happening around me.. And what people are talking about across the globe. I get a good feeling - I know that.”*

Turkers also developed personal skills such as in language, coding and computing. *“**Rohan:** Just this morning, I did a task for \$2 - an RSA algorithm which I had to decrypt.”*

Kaufmann et. al’s research says that the turkers’ motivation for working on crowdsourcing platforms is ‘fun’. During our study we found that turkers generally preferred interesting tasks over the mundane, repetitive tasks such as form-filling, image categorization, information verification, transcription etc that were commonly available on the platform. But they still felt they were working, and earning money. The job being interesting was an additional perk of working on AMT. Gupta et. al suggest that this ‘fun’ is actually job satisfaction. Although the work turkers did, might not have offered high financial rewards

and were seen as low-income, low-skill cognitive piecework, turkers found different ways to feel good about the work they did.

This makes us question the need for ‘gamification’ or ‘making jobs thrilling’ to make workers come back to do more of them. People tend to find their own ways to make work interesting for them and associate personal values with it. For instance, Roy presents a case of factory machine operatives, working on repetitive tasks who achieved job satisfaction through playful informal interaction by taking planned interruptions amidst doing their routine jobs.

In my study, the ‘games’ provide ‘bread and butter’ for some, job satisfaction, opportunities for learning and skill development for others. Now, can associating games with ‘job satisfaction’ make jobs more lucrative in a low-skilled job environment? Does the ‘context’ of gaming influence these values – for instance, when it is for work versus when it is for leisure or research? Are there other human values game-players associate with gaming that we don’t know about yet?

As an ethnographer, I pose these questions to wider research community. I think these questions will make for an interesting discussion.

References:

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