

STATUS *GAMES*

THE FIELD KIT

A practical, printable guide to recognition, incentives, trust and the work that never makes the scoreboard.

EIGHT ARENAS / SIXTEEN PAGES

Thought experiments, repair moves, scripts, and a reusable metric audit. No points. No rankings. No moral purity tests.

FREE TO READ, PRINT, QUESTION AND USE

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A FIELD GUIDE TO THE ACTUAL GAME

The scoreboard is a map.

Sometimes it is a useful map. It is never the whole territory.

Recognition is not the enemy. Public acknowledgment can make valuable work visible, support coordination, attract resources and create belonging. A clear measure can help a group learn whether its efforts are improving something that matters.

The danger begins when the proxy replaces the purpose. If the quantity being rewarded is easier to optimize than the thing people actually care about, incentives may make the number look better while the underlying mission stays flat - or gets worse.

These are conditional risks, not iron laws. People do not always chase praise, and visible achievement is not automatically empty. A system can celebrate excellence and still ask what it has missed.

THE FIVE-QUESTION LENS

1

PURPOSE

What are we actually trying to make better?

2

PROXY

What is easy to count, praise or display?

3

VISIBILITY

Whose contribution does that signal miss?

4

PRESSURE

How might behaviour change once rewards depend on it?

5

REPAIR

What second form of evidence or recognition would help?

Use this as a conversation tool, not a diagnostic. A number might be accurate and still fail to answer the decision you are making.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The classroom

Learning Is More Than A Grade

PURPOSE

Develop understanding, skill, curiosity and a capacity to revise errors.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Average marks, awards and polished final answers.

A SMALL SITUATION

A class wins praise for a sharp rise in test scores. The improvement may be real and worth celebrating. Yet the new schedule quietly removes open-ended experiments and peer tutoring because neither appears clearly on the dashboard. One learner who learned to ask better questions remains invisible; another who practices efficient test tactics flourishes. Neither student is the villain.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Students with resources for exam practice and teachers who can demonstrate rapid gains.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Slow mastery, peer assistance, risk-taking, student voice and uneven starting conditions.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Keep the test, then review samples of student revisions, a breakdown of who improved, and opportunities for inquiry. Make time for teachers to say what the scores cannot prove.

Trade-off: Portfolios are slower to evaluate and can themselves become curated performance.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- Which learning goal cannot be inferred from one examination?
- What improvement would students recognize even without a certificate?
- How could a teacher detect whose progress the mean score conceals?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Choose one achievement you want to recognize this month. Name two distinct kinds of evidence that would justify that recognition.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The creative collective

Who Gets The Spotlight?

PURPOSE

Produce meaningful work while sustaining craft, learning and collaboration.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Views, social mentions, opening-night applause and credit lists.

A SMALL SITUATION

The collective puts its newest work online. A vivid short clip draws new audiences and potential patrons. That attention is valuable. Meanwhile, the person who built the accessible exhibit, fixed errors and helped others finish is credited only in a private chat. When the group plans its next exhibition, everybody wants to create content that can become the next clip.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Performers, visual work and members comfortable promoting themselves.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Editing, care work, translation, maintenance, mentoring and slow experiments.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Keep public promotion, but rotate curatorial notes, name hidden contributors with consent, and document what made the shared output possible.

Trade-off: Recognition can become forced visibility; some contributors prefer privacy.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- Would this contribution still matter without an audience?
- Whose effort made other people's work possible?
- What kind of credit would the contributor actually welcome?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Write a credit note for someone who improved the work without being the face of it. Obtain permission before sharing.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The workplace

When The Dashboard Becomes The Job

PURPOSE

Solve customer problems reliably without burning out the people who serve them.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Tickets closed, response time and activity counters.

A SMALL SITUATION

A service team receives applause for halving response times. Some customers genuinely benefit. But complex cases are split into tiny tickets or marked solved too soon. Experienced workers find that taking longer to solve an unusual problem now looks like underperformance. Everyone is working harder to make the dashboard more elegant.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Fast repeatable cases and employees assigned to short tasks.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Difficult cases, continuity, judgment, teaching newcomers and preventive fixes.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Pair speed with re-open rates, resolved outcomes and random qualitative reviews. Ask staff which incentive they believe changes service quality for better or worse.

Trade-off: Additional indicators increase administration and may become gamed themselves.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- What could staff do to raise the metric without helping customers?
- Which difficult cases are penalized by averages?
- Who gets to dispute a dashboard's interpretation?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Take one familiar work KPI. Write down a plausible shortcut that raises it without improving the mission, and one check that could expose the shortcut.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The neighbourhood

Not All Care Can Attend The Ceremony

PURPOSE

Build a place where residents can contribute, belong and get practical help.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Event attendance, photographed volunteering and service awards.

A SMALL SITUATION

A neighbourhood committee awards a monthly volunteer prize. Attendance rises, which helps the clean-up. But an elder who lends tools, a carer working weekends and a shopkeeper who provides water rarely appear in photographs. A well-meaning award has taught people that the camera defines community service.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Residents with flexible time, public confidence and transport.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Private support, logistical help and people whose schedules or abilities differ.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Ask residents what support they need; vary ways to participate and celebrate contributions without demanding photographs.

Trade-off: Unverified quiet contributions are hard to compare. That may be a reason not to force a single rank.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- Who cannot attend at the designated hour?
- What contribution would still matter if no award existed?
- Can recognition be offered without obliging public exposure?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Redesign one community appreciation ritual so it can honor contribution without requiring public attendance.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The public forum

Popular Is Not Synonymous With True

PURPOSE

Make useful information, disagreement and correction easier to find.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Likes, shares, engagement rate and dramatic replies.

A SMALL SITUATION

A thoughtful thread is overtaken by a faster, more certain-sounding post. It goes viral; it may even spotlight a neglected issue. But moderators discover that people now hedge less and perform more. A correction reaches fewer readers than the original claim. If the room applauds certainty, careful contributors may withdraw.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Fast, emotionally salient and highly shareable contributions.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Caveats, corrections, translation, slow verification and respectful questions.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Make updates and corrections visible; elevate helpful summaries and clear sourcing, not only reactions. Give moderators context and appeals.

Trade-off: A quieter or longer answer is not necessarily more accurate.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- What evidence is missing from the most shared claim?
- Can a contributor change their mind without losing face?
- What does the platform reward that its community says it values least?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Rewrite one attention-grabbing claim with a boundary condition and a genuine possibility of revision.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The research lab

Credit Should Help Discovery

PURPOSE

Produce trustworthy knowledge that others can inspect, challenge and extend.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Paper count, prestige outlets, citation totals and first-author credit.

A SMALL SITUATION

A lab improves its output count. The new incentive encourages concise publishable findings, and some of them are excellent. Yet the team cannot find time to reproduce a fragile result or maintain shared data. The only person who knows the calibration steps is leaving next month. What seems like productivity may be borrowing from future reliability.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Short-term publishable outputs and well-attributed novelty.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Replication, negative results, careful documentation, shared infrastructure.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Reserve time and recognition for verification and maintenance, and audit whether claims can be reproduced. Protect multiple kinds of scientific contribution.

Trade-off: Assessing rigor is costly, and generic replication quotas can themselves turn into proxies.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- Would the work matter if it attracted few citations?
- Who maintains the conditions that make discovery possible?
- What claim would we change after a failed replication?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Name one hidden maintenance task in a research or creative project. What fails if it stops for six months?

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The dinner party

Conversation Is Not An Audition

PURPOSE

Create an evening of pleasure, presence and reciprocal conversation.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Airtime, prestige stories, applause and attention.

A SMALL SITUATION

A charismatic guest has everyone laughing. This is a genuine gift to the room. Later a second guest attempts to share an idea but is interrupted. The host must decide whether to keep the momentum or reopen space. Neither entertainment nor quietness makes a person more worthy; the allocation of attention is simply shaping the experience.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Quick storytellers, those with famous contacts and confident speakers.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Thoughtful pauses, listening, hosting labour, people who speak more slowly.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Invite without compelling: "You were starting a thought - would you like to finish?" Share appreciation for different kinds of presence.

Trade-off: Too much orchestration can make social life feel like a facilitated seminar.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- Who has not had an easy opening into the conversation?
- Are we appreciating the story or only borrowed prestige?
- Can someone opt not to speak without being singled out?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

At your next group discussion, notice an interrupted idea and make one gentle, optional invitation to return to it.

THE EIGHT PLAYABLE ARENAS

The family game

Fair Rules, Different Purposes

PURPOSE

Enjoy shared time, challenge, laughter and voluntary participation.

THE TEMPTING PROXY

Wins, streaks, champion tally and final ranking.

A SMALL SITUATION

An experienced player wins three rounds and deserves credit for skill. Two others stop asking for another game. The rules were fair, but the group never agreed on the purpose of the evening: serious competition or simply being together? The tension is real; pretending the win did not happen would not solve it.

WHO BECOMES LEGIBLE?

Experienced competitive players and clear winners.

WHO MAY DISAPPEAR?

Learning, generosity, jokes and people who want a lower-stakes evening.

A BETTER DESIGN - AND ITS COST

Possible repair: Ask what type of play people want. Keep wins meaningful in the chosen game while offering optional teams, breaks or a different game next time.

Trade-off: Changing rules mid-game without consent can feel unfair and patronizing.

QUESTIONS WORTH CARRYING

- What did everyone think they came here for?
- Can the winner keep their win while others have more choice?
- What will this family remember a month from now?

TRY THIS IN REAL LIFE

Before your next game night, ask each participant to name their preferred type of fun, then pick a format everyone can decline.

WORKSHOP

A metric stress test.

Use this before changing a reward, adopting a dashboard or giving out an award.

1

STATE THE REAL MISSION

Example: “Make first-time customers feel helped.”

Avoid a mission that is already a count (“close 100 tickets”).

2

WRITE THE TEMPTING NUMBER

Example: “Average ticket close time.”

What makes it cheap, visible or prestigious?

3

INVENT A SHORTCUT

Example: “Close a complex ticket before the issue is fixed.”

If the shortcut is possible, the indicator needs a safeguard.

4

NAME WHO COULD LOSE

Example: “Customers with unusual problems; staff who handle difficult cases.”

Look beyond the people with a voice in the measurement meeting.

5

CHOOSE A SECOND LENS

Example: “Review re-open rates and a sample of resolved customer stories.”

More data is not always better; look for validity.

6

SCHEDULE A REVISION

Example: “Ask the team after four weeks what behaviour changed.”

A measure should remain revisable, not sacred.

Useful warning: adding five more metrics can create five more games. The aim is not perfect quantification, but better judgment and explicit uncertainty.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOLS

Scripts for the real world.

Questions that challenge a proxy without shaming the people who use it.

IN A MEETING

- “What decision is this measure supposed to help us make?”
- “Could the number improve while the customer experience gets worse?”
- “Is there a group whose experience is lost in the average?”
- “What would make us change this dashboard?”

WHEN PRAISE FEELS UNEVEN

- “Who made this outcome possible behind the scenes?”
- “Do they actually want public credit, or another form of thanks?”
- “Could we recognize the process as well as the result?”
- “What was difficult to see from the stage?”

WHEN YOU FEEL PULLED INTO THE GAME

- “Am I doing this because it matters, because it will be seen, or both?”
- “What would I still value if nobody knew I did it?”
- “Is the recognition helping me learn or just defend an image?”
- “Which comparison is useful, and which is consuming the afternoon?”

WHEN SOMEONE DISAGREES

- “What legitimate purpose does this ranking serve?”
- “What would we lose if we removed it?”
- “Can we preserve that benefit while reducing its blind spots?”
- “What evidence would change either of our minds?”

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

A better question is usually more useful than a more impressive accusation.

BEYOND THE MUSEUM

Four everyday tests.

These miniature cases are invented; they illustrate how to think, not how people universally behave.

01 / THE FITNESS STREAK

Goal: sustainable activity. **Proxy:** uninterrupted daily check-ins.

The streak encourages consistency, but the person trains while injured to protect it. A better design preserves the motivational cue while making recovery an honored part of the process.

Cost of repair: flexible rules can weaken the simplicity that made the streak motivating.

02 / THE PARENT LEADERBOARD

Goal: meaningful student support. **Proxy:** number of school events attended.

Parents with flexible schedules appear exceptionally engaged; shift workers become invisible. The school can offer asynchronous participation and distinguish support from attendance.

Cost of repair: extra channels demand coordination and may still miss unreported care.

03 / THE CREATOR ANALYTICS PANEL

Goal: make work that readers find useful. **Proxy:** average views in the first 24 hours.

The artist favors controversy and short fragments over demanding essays. Views remain one signal of reach, but direct reader feedback and follow-up use can add depth.

Cost of repair: deep impact is expensive to observe and attribution is uncertain.

04 / THE TEAM HELPFULNESS AWARD

Goal: reduce colleagues' friction. **Proxy:** public nominations.

Friendly visible favors get nominated. Quiet documentation and prevention rarely do. A rotating peer review process can surface unseen work without requiring a single winner.

Cost of repair: broader evaluation takes time and may introduce new social bias.

PRINTABLE TEMPLATE

The one-page audit.

Use a pen. Leave parts blank when you do not know the answer; that is useful information too.

01 THE ACTUAL GOAL

What matters even if no one gets a badge?

02 THE CURRENT PROXY

What number, signal or award is taking its place?

03 WHAT IT GETS RIGHT

Where is that proxy genuinely informative?

04 HOW IT CAN BE GAMED

What behaviour improves the indicator without serving the goal?

05 WHO GOES UNSEEN

Whose conditions, contributions or costs are excluded?

06 A REPAIR WITH A TRADE-OFF

What would you test, and what might your fix make worse?

EVIDENCE AND BOUNDARIES

Keep the distinctions.

These readings support concepts, not numerical outcomes in the fictional arenas.

GOODHART / TARGETS

Original observation concerns statistical relations changing under policy control. The familiar maxim is a later popular formulation, often associated with Marilyn Strathern.

<https://www.damtp.cam.ac.uk/user/mem2/papers/LHCE/goodhart.html>

CAMPBELL / SOCIAL INDICATORS

Donald T. Campbell (1979), "Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change", on how high-stakes indicators can distort processes.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189\(79\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189(79)90048-X)

REWARDS / MOTIVATION

Deci, Koestner & Ryan (1999), meta-analysis on extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation. Effects differ by reward type and conditions.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10589297/>

RECOGNITION

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Recognition". Not all recognition is reducible to status competition.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/recognition/>

SOCIAL NORMS

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Social Norms". Expectations and approval can coordinate as well as constrain.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-norms/>

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Social Epistemology". Credit systems can direct and distort scientific labor.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-social/>

Claim boundaries: Attention and trust values in the game are invented teaching counters. The scenes do not predict human behavior. Better measurement is rarely "no measurement": it is a better match between evidence, purpose, context, and a revisable decision.

NO LEADERBOARD

Keep the goal. *Question the proxy.* Keep the people.

An imperfect number can be useful. A sincere prize can be kind. The important question is whether our signals still serve the work, or whether we have started serving the signals.

TAKE THIS TO YOUR NEXT DECISION

What is the real purpose? Who is left out of the visible result? What would count as evidence that we are getting the purpose right?

STATUS GAMES IS PART OF THE SAHILVERSE

Explore the wider work: sahiltayal.com

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