Game theory for the insane

TEFLONRABBIT ARTICLE No.215

Unique Identifier:35cfa5c3-043a-4a55-a88b-5d15dfce0c25



Cooperative engagement often degrades into emotional decisions based on learned and dysfunctional behaviour

Sunday, February 26, 2023 - 09:48

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“I always say that it’s about breaking the rules. But the secret of breaking rules in a way that works is understanding what the rules are in the first place.”
Rick Wakeman

Dogs *Fair play* *Perception management* *History* *Competition* *Value*

Since some distant point in mankinds history, there has been a symbiotic relationship played out between humans and canids. While humans have adopted the dominant role in the relationship, there has been numerous cases of dogs displaying impossible feats of cognition and generally outstanding deeds. As a consequence there is probably no member of the animal realm with a fate more intertwined with that of human beings.

The somewhat abstract game of 'chase the ball / stick' has been enacted between the participants throughout the entirety of history. Often dismissed as a frivolous way to reduce boredom during the never ending walkies regimen, the art of the stick is actually a microcosm of complex game theory.



Generally speaking the format is quite straightforward, the human throws the object and the dog retrieves it. However within this otherwise simplistic framework exists a myriad of both instinctive and learned behavioural patterns. The instinct to retrieve is present across the vast majority of the canine genus. Because of the dogs natural capacity for learned behaviour, personality traits bring a considerable amount of variance into play. There are dogs who simply can't be bothered, they will make one or two retrievals and then deliberately 'lose' the object and continue with their territory based routine. These animals have come to understand the futility of the game and have decided that they really don't need the exercise and their owners can waste their time if they wish. This occurs with dogs of all ages, whether they are frantic and youthful or whether they're of a more stoic and senior profile, it's really just about the personality.

The average four legged familiar enjoys the game. Visit any pet shop and witness a substantial investment in lures and retrieval objects. Many available in high visibility fluorescent colours. So lucrative is the market that manufacturers have driven this eternal sport with developments in systems to increase throw distances and locate lost balls / frisbies / rings and so on. However the origins of the game are facilitated without any financial requirement. Any reasonably robust stick will suffice and the noble sport is performed ubiquitously, in the exact same way as it always has.



The general structure of the game theory appears quite rudimentary, but when the finer points of the motivators are examined, analysis reveals some comparisons with exclusively human interaction.

The game begins in one of two modes;

- The thrower identifies a suitable stick and initiates gameplay.

OR

- The stick is retrieved without being thrown and offered to the thrower by way of chaser initiating gameplay.

Retrievals then commence with decreasing enthusiasm as stamina wanes. Variations include aquatic course, obstacle course and hill chase.

For many dogs this repetitive game play model represents the entirety of the campaign. Some have more capacity for endurance than others but overall it's a solid staple of canine recreation and most participants will appreciate an observance of fair play and good sportsmanship.

Within the first mode of initiating game play there exists latitude for the chaser to introduce a mini game. This latitude exists during the intitiating of game play, but also in each retrieval.

The object is brought into range of the thrower and apparently offered up as if to engage with the primary objective. This offer is not genuine and when the thrower attempts to accept the object, the chaser retracts the offer and moves out of range. This behaviour can be interpreted as the chaser asserting dominance prior to primary gameplay commencing, or re-commencing. The purpose of taking a dominant role early in proceedings is widely accepted as astute strategic theory. The non verbal communication exhibited by the chaser during the post deception triumphant parade of victory could generally de described as smug posturing. With the ego forming a substantial part of the canine mindset, they're certainly not above behavior considered by humans to be really quite crass.



This mini game is more likely to have evolved based on the mindset of the chaser as opposed to the thrower. It also provides a clear opportunity for the chaser to assert personality traits. There are certain dogs that use the feigned facet of the mini game as a platform for quite dysfunctional behaviour. In specific cases the chaser has deliberately selected a stick with angular edges and or rough surfaces and offers it up as if to engage in a friendly bout of the ancient and noble sport. Going beyond the standard deception, the chaser allows the thrower to take hold of the stick before wrenching it away with disproportionate levels of aggression. This probably accounts for more minor injuries than any dog owner cares to admit. This is a deliberate and calculated tactic designed to escalate conflict and forms an integral part of the ever present alpha / beta pack psychology. This psychology is being played out everywhere by humans and animals alike.

In response to this overt application of agenda driven subversion, the role of the thrower also has scope for the spontaneous introduction of a mini game. Again deception plays an essential part of this extension to the traditional institute of stick retrieval. During the primary throwing of the stick, the thrower may decide not to release the stick and thereby deceive the chaser into setting off on a fools errand. The number of times this can be effectively repeated is proportionately reduced with repeated frequency. The majority of dogs will be fooled once or twice and then refuse to participate without clear evidence of a recent stick release. While this could be construed as an equally dysfunctional hijacking of game play, the thrower generally refrains from arrogant displays of supremacy as it would rightfully be considered bad sportsmanship among the greater stick chasing community.

At this point it should be clearly understood that there is finite value in attempting to plumb the depths of the canine mind. Ultimately their brains are only the size of a small fruit and as such their capacity for high functioning, sophisticated nuances of cooperative interaction, is quite limited. Nonetheless canids do have a complex range of personality characteristics. Their extensive capacity for learned behaviour can produce individuals that have ongoing psychological issues. From abandonment issues as a result of inadequate weaning to isolation based schizoid behaviour. Urban lifestyle is not the kindest on the canine psyche. While these animals are the end result of many millennia of domestication, they're only ever going to be a single generation away from being born feral. Without domestication influence and behaviour control, genetic programming returns to the fore with these animals becoming as self sufficient, primitive, aggressive and as unpredictably *wild* as their distant ancestors were.



The successful partnership between humans and canids was always a working arrangement. The smarter dogs kept the aggressive behaviour to a bare minimum and enjoyed cooked scraps from the campfire as a result. When any incursions into the camp threatened the safety of the tribe, the dogs were free to exhibit as much aggression as they could. There isn't really much scope for this evolutionary codependency template to be applied in the contemporary metropolitan environment. As a result one of the most successful canine enterprises is group dog walking. Generally speaking it involves a single dog walker collecting the pets of their clients and taking them for a walk. All very simple on the face of things. However in terms of canine well-being, the benefits of group walking can not be underestimated. The previously mentioned isolation based schizoid behavior is a serious issue for urban dogs. While on group walks, the dogs get the opportunity to socially interact with each other and most importantly; run with the pack. This reconnects these chronologically displaced animals with their genetic memory. In terms of combating dysfunction due to isolation it's broadly a massive winner for the dogs long term well-being.

The comparisons with human behaviour are not limited to the social benefits of group interaction. Modeled in the alpha / beta mini game there is a social dynamic that can be observed in numerous examples of human interaction. The invitation to engage in competition plays into the ego of the recipient. It is essentially a confidence trick designed to acquire dominance collateral. The player offering the invitation has weighed up the target of their confidence trick and made a calculation based on what they observe in the behaviour of the target. Anyone who is clearly looking to play the game themselves is of limited value. The chances are that they are quite conversant with the dynamics of the game and as such do not represent a good risk in terms of acquiring dominance collateral. Ideally the target should represent an unwitting, yet capable individual with clear dominance attributes. Such a target is valuable because to be seen to assert dominance over such an individual reinforces self image in terms of being *more* dominant. As with most competition based games the vast majority of the interaction is based on self promotion of the ego. For the most part this has evolved primarily as a way to tackle boredom and has produced what appears to be a reasonable way to waste time. There are however, social and organised groups that consider this eternal dominance principle to be of considerable value. Even within the more cerebral sections of society, this principle is still reflected. There is a viewpoint that the only people more abrasively competitive with each other than academics, are the clergy.



The dysfunctional behaviour exhibited in the deliberate loading of the mini game exists very much in the realm of human behaviour. For maximum dominance acquisition the inviting player will often seek to rig the game as much as possible. This can't be easily described as cheating or unfair play because the entire mini game exists as an undeclared interaction. It simply isn't covered by the rules of primary game play. As such it inhabits an area beneath the equality radar of the unwitting

player(s). This facilitates the inviting player in the introduction of parameters which exist purely to suit their own desired outcome. In human terms this 'colouring outside the lines' is what forms much of what we see within savage capitalism. Regulatory mechanisms are perceived to be restrictions. Barriers to desired outcome which only serve to deny gratification and are simply to be overcome, at any cost. If your competitor is doing better than you, faking a major buy up of their stock can serve to influence their share price value. Manipulating buys of stock with a view to driving down the share value is something that has dominated trading for decades. An unwitting broker may perceive risk in a particular offer price, but makes the gamble based on the potential returns. Unwitting investors may be completely duped into buying into an offer in a substantial way. They did not assess the risk accurately and as such made the classic error of believing that this 'too good to be true' offer was theirs due to some magical and special characteristic. It is this enormous predilection for self delusion that fuels confidence trickery and allows it to perpetuate in every field of commerce and industry.



Not withstanding the earlier disclaimer regarding the limited canine capacity for nuance, it is important to comprehend why dogs behave in such ways. In this way we understand what motivates human beings whose subconscious, animal selves generally behave in a way no better than dogs. Ultimately every dog is massively paranoid. It's just in their nature to be worriers in terms of security and 'twas ever thus. This insecurity is exhibited in the barking and general commotion displayed during a group meeting or parting dynamic. As far as the dog is concerned it is their duty and their purpose to be protecting everyone in the group / pack. They can't help it and it accounts for much of the behaviour their human counterparts consider to be stereotypical antisocial canine behaviour. They're also not over encumbered by a complex system of appropriate social behaviour, or in other words - manners. As a result when an unknown factor is introduced such as someone leaving, dogs

will generally feel incapable of protecting everyone and voice their concern in ways which are difficult to ignore.

While the daily interaction between homosapien sapien and canus lupus familiaris plays out against a familiar backdrop, comparative analysis in terms of human behaviour often provides something to really .... *get our teeth into*.