



We live to compete. What I learned by winning the Duolingo diamond league



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It's Sunday night, and until midnight I can't go to sleep. My opponent, an account called Roman with a status of a French flag, is only 100 XPs (experience points) behind me and he's not stopping. My advantage was

unwavering until Roman came online, I've built it up steadily in the last couple of days. Now we're frantically competing, which in Latin means striving or seeking together. There's no time to think about what it is we are seeking.

Spoilers: what I learned by winning the Duolingo diamond league wasn't Spanish. It was more of a life lesson than a language one. It prompted me to explore why we humans are compelled to compete and what is the worth of winning, with the help of the usual suspects: ancient Greeks and Nietzsche.

How I won the Duolingo diamond league

I'm on holiday in a remote place and my boyfriend suddenly has to prepare for an important interview. I have time on my hands. Seeing my strong position in this week's Duolingo diamond league, a thought pops to my head: that with a bit of work, I could actually win this thing.

I have an over 700 days streak on the app, and I've consistently won in every league, but not in the diamond one. It's the last league, and I can only assume that it's full of users like me: those who make up the top 1% of activity globally. **The superusers.** I can assume it, because I don't know much about them. Every week, there's a changing list of usernames with a number of XPs, and all I can check is their weekly progress and their followers.

Before Roman came online, I was learning a language too. Now I'm just earning points. They don't call it a diamond league for no reason: it's hard, so hard that a passion for languages is no longer enough. **You have to want to win more than you want to learn, because learning is more time consuming than simply gaining XP advantage,** and time is the most precious asset for you and your opponent. I understand it instantly when Roman's score rapidly nears mine. We both have the same number of

minutes before midnight (when the diamond league finishes) and the one who wins will be the one who's used those minutes more efficiently, not the one who learned more.

I'm doing timed challenges, which check my reflexes and typing speed more than my Spanish knowledge, and mastery tests from very old material. **To avoid the need for too much new content, the app encourages revision by paying most XPs for those tests, and if I go far back enough, the stuff is so easy that I can click without thinking.** This way, hopefully I save enough seconds to outdo Roman.

It boils down to seconds in the end. At 23:59, when my eyes, neck and thumbs hurt, when my brain hates the app *Juan who come manzanas*, and when my phone overheats and glitches, I desperately stare at the diamond league countdown, waiting for the outcome. Roman is only 20 XPs behind me, he could outdo me with just one timed challenge, and it's too late for me to start another one and build an advantage myself. Roman's status is green, he's still practising. Now the question is, is his challenge going to finish during the seconds we've got left until midnight, giving him the champion title — or is it going to finish just a few seconds after midnight, when none of this matters.



Good job!

You finished #1 and kept your position in
the Diamond League

The countdown is over, the app freezes for what feels like a long and scary moment. Congratulations and a diamond medal show on my screen, together with a reward of 150 gems. They are the Duolingo currency that I

can use to buy mastery tests and timed challenges, and in fact, I've just spent way more than 150 of those to win. I'm dying to know what else happens, now that I've won the hardest league.

I click continue, and see my name on a new list, among a different bunch of users. It's a new diamond league. After winning in the hardest Duolingo league, I got placed in that same league again. There's nothing more.

Roman's username disappears, and I go from hating his guts to missing him instantly. I realise I may never end up in the same league as him again.

Roman, if you're reading this, what were we together-striving for or seeking?

Good and bad Eris: Duo-ality of competition

The answer to that question will depend on what type of competitiveness you subscribe to, the good or the evil one. Just like Duo who supports you in your learning journey, and Duo who wants XPs or your blood, who are two versions of the same owl.

In ancient Greece good and bad competition were two faces of the same goddess, Eris. Under the influence of good Eris, potters competed to make the prettiest pot and playwrights endeavoured to write the most stirring tragedies. Under bad Eris, however, people argued, fought and killed. Hence, Eris was also the goddess of chaos, someone we'd call today a shit-stirrer. Her best-known prank was to toss an apple signed 'For the Most Beautiful' among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, which eventually caused the Trojan War.

So which Eris is the spirit of the Duolingo diamond league, and what can we learn from it? Let's look at how two sides of Eris manifested themselves in Greek organisation of life.

Greece wasn't always and everywhere democratic, and during the Classical and Hellenistic period, Greek aristocracy had a lot of spare time. It was in good taste to use this time to strive for *kalokagathia* — a corporal, spiritual and moral excellence. As an example, gymnastics was a practice of gentlemanly lifestyle to ensure harmonious development of body and mind.

Whether it was in gymnastics, arts or intellectual pursuits, competitiveness was a way for Greek aristocrats to exchange ideas and build fraternity. **What we would now call contests were back then festivals and exhibitions, where competition was a matter of personal honour and of paying tribute to gods, who gave one their abilities.** There were no prizes — that would've offended the gods — and no professionalism. Even the Olympics are first described as a religious festival, where the winner would get only a laurel wreath.

As Greece became more fragmented and democratic, polis competed for space and resources, and individuals for power and fame. Contests for mass spectators began, the competitors became professionals, with a goal

of winning money and privileges. We can safely say that not much has changed in sport and arts since then.

There was a time when Duolingo was just about fun and learning. It was a nice little app to help me become a better version of myself. But through its gamification aspect, I got so hooked up that I got into the diamond league, and once you're there, there's no going back. Every week, 25 users from the league get to keep their position, and 5 get demoted. **You simply feel that you've come too far to drop the ball now, and at the end of the week you become a professional in XP-winning tricks with little learning purpose,** just to outdo the bottom 5 users. Winning, as I described, is almost impossible, and those who do win boast about it on social media and get lots of Duo-followers. 42 people I don't know started following me when I got my winner title.

There are also other stories on social media: those who broke free from the spell. Among the brags and congratulations, you can find posts in Facebook groups and Subreddits which encourage you to prioritise learning instead of competing, like this one:

You'd think that no-one needs encouragement to do less Duolingo lessons, but yes, we do. I know what this post is talking about and I recognise the courage of the author, that I myself don't have.

Today is my 104th week in the diamond league. Despite winning the league and discovering that it's not worth the effort, I still can't bring myself to stop competing in it.

Duo-Oeconomicus versus the Ubermensch

Saying that winning was not worth the effort is a big statement (well, for Duolingo superusers at least, it's kind of a heresy) and makes you wonder what is actually the worth of winning. Why do we compete?

Currently, Western culture explains competition more with the bad Eris than the good one. Ever since John Stuart Mill invented homo oeconomicus, we just accept that we have to compete in our lives, because we're programmed to look for profit or pleasure. We're simply greedy and

up for a fight. Apparently, our materialism and aggression is what pushes the world forward (all the way to the brink of collapse).

By winning the diamond league, I spent more gems than I won, I almost forgot rather than learned Spanish, and I certainly wasted a day of my holiday and a good night's sleep. So much for profit or pleasure seeking.

Then there's Nietzsche's interpretation of competitiveness, closer to supporting the good version of Eris. In this version, competitiveness gives people a potential to transcend their human existence. Because competition never ends, it constantly elevates us towards excellence, helps us understand ourselves, and ultimately — overcome ourselves and become the *Übermensch*.

A Duolingo superuser is an *Übermensch* striving to overcome herself. As you win the diamond league, lose your opponent, and start another week in another diamond league, you recognise that competing is just an endless peeling of layers behind which are you again. And for all you know, the other people could be a simulation forcing you to compete.

The Greek 'noble' or 'pure' urge to compete was the need to pay tribute to the Gods. Gods gave Greeks their talents, and they demanded to see those talents being used. Talents were great gifts, but through poisoning a talent with a drop of competitiveness, Gods turned it into a curse, too. **In their noble attempt to overcome human limitations, competitors were just entertaining the gods.** Greedy, pleasure-seeking gods. Zeus was giving

the Olympic sprinters the same look of care, amusement and pity that we may give to a hamster in a spinning wheel.

And that is why the good Eris is the bad Eris after all. That is why they were always one and the same.

And that is why the supportive and fluffy Duo also wants your sweat, blood and tears. **He is the Duo-Oeconomicus, a greedy, profit-seeking owl.** On the surface, he just wants you to practise your language talent, but he also poisons it with a drop of competitiveness, which enslaves you to the game.

People who compete are trying to overcome human limitations? Staying up late, wasting their holidays, straining their eyes and hands on your app? That sounds like a group of users who will really help you monetise. Who will really help you get popular on social media. Who will not care about the quality of your content, and stay on your app forever.

That's why competition is worth it. It's not worth it for you, but it's worth it for Duo.

Duolingo

Spanish

Competition

Nietzsche

Language Learning



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