Superficial Alignment, Subtle Divergence, and Nudge Sensitivity in LLM Decision-Making

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Abstract

LLMs are being set loose in complex, real-world environments involving sequential decision-making and tool use. Often, this involves making choices on behalf of human users. Not much is known about the distribution of such choices, and how susceptible they are to different choice architectures. We perform a case study with a few such LLM models on a multi-attribute tabular decision-making problem, under the canonical default option nudge and additional prompting strategies. We show that, despite superficial similarities to human choice distributions, such models differ in subtle but important ways. First, they show much higher susceptibility to the default option nudge. Second, they diverge in points earned, being affected by factors like the idiosyncrasy of available prizes. Third, they diverge in information acquisition strategies: e.g. incurring substantial cost to reveal too much information, or selecting without revealing any. Finally, we show that simple prompt nudges like self-explanations can shift the choice distribution, and few-shot prompting with human data can induce greater alignment. These findings suggest that more information is needed before deploying models as agents or assistants acting on behalf of users in complex environments.

1 Introduction

We seem to want more from our language models than just a good conversation. Software agents [1] powered by LLMs can now in principle browse the web [2], use spreadsheets [3], go shopping [4], make financial decisions [5], and make many kinds of choices while operating computer-based tools [6, 7]. Yet, we don't know how they choose. Do they choose what we would? Or do they systematically differ in important ways we should better understand before we hand the reins over? How easily and extensively can their choices be manipulated, maliciously or not? If simple nudges can significantly change such agents' decisions, they could have adverse effects on the people whose lives these decisions affect.

In this paper, we conduct a case study comparing LLM and human choices in a complex, sequential decision making task [8]. The task involves a meta-level decision making problem, wherein agents must make decisions about how to decide. The behavior of human agents in this task has been predicted using a resource rational model, and in particular how such human decision-making responds to nudges [8]. We construct a version of this task for LLMs, and examine how they make decisions and how this differs from their human participant counterparts. We also analyze how LLM decision-making is affected by a simple "default option" nudge, in which one option is labeled as a default. We show that, despite some superficial signs of alignment, LLM decisions depart substantially and unpredictably from human decision-making processes, and exhibit artifacts that reflect different meta-level strategies. Finally, we show some simple ways that we can further "nudge" models to better replicate human participants' decision making.

*Equal contribution.

NeurIPS 2024 Workshop on Behavioral Machine Learning.

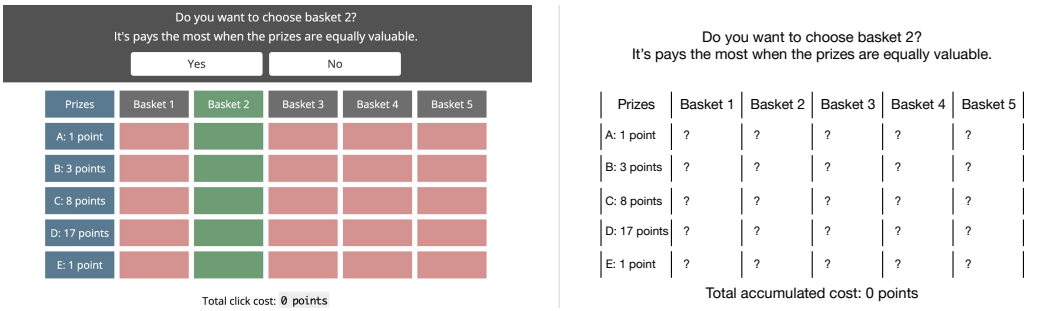

Figure 1: **(Left)** A screenshot from the original game setup [8] displaying a default option nudge, the number of prizes with their points, and the hidden cells for each basket. **(Right)** Our reconstruction of the game with just text and minor rephrasing, indicating hidden cells with a question mark.

2 Related Work

There's no guarantee that training LLMs with human-generated data leads to behavior that aligns with how we actually behave. Human behavior is complex, and often eludes our intuition. For example, the way people choose often contradicts traditional ideas about decision-making [9, 10], such as expected utility theory, which assume that people make rational choices. Instead, resource-rational models build on bounded rationality [11] to assume people choose rationally but are limited by their computational resources [12]. As another example, choice architecture (i.e. the variation of ways in which options are presented) influences how people choose [13]. Nudges (interventions on choice architecture) can be structured to alter people's choices in predictable ways [14], often towards beneficial outcomes, without limiting people's ability to make their own decisions. While these behaviors occur widely in people, the decision-making process in LLM-based agents is unknown and difficult to evaluate. Considering that these models are being used to simulate human behavior [15–19], it is important to study their implicit decision-making process.

Previous research studying behavior alignment has shown that LLMs model people as highly rational decision-makers [20], struggle to accurately model trade-offs seen in human behavior [21], exacerbate human biases [22], and show high variance in their performance as proxies for human behavior [19]. Moreover, LLMs are sensitive to small perturbations in prompts [23–26], the format of information like tabular data [27], the order of multiple-choice questions [28], and the prompt architecture [29, 24]; and are influenced by probabilities even in deterministic tasks [30]. Though people are deciding when and where to deploy these models, and could conceivably mitigate such issues by choosing responsibly, we are sometimes overconfident about the capabilities of LLMs [31]. Ultimately, better understanding how LLM-based agents make decisions, and how this differs from human decision-makers, might allow us to both design better choice architectures for LLMs, and make informed choices about when and how to deploy such agents.

3 Methods

To explore LLMs' implicit decision-making, we replicated an existing experimental paradigm for studying nudges with people [8]. The experiment consists of hidden decision-relevant information that agents can choose to reveal for a cost (see Figure 1). There are prizes with associated points p that apply equally to all different baskets with hidden cells B_i. The reward r for choosing a basket is $r = p \cdot B_i$. Revealing a cell costs 2 points, and 30 points = \$0.01 in reward. The goal is to choose the basket with the highest reward with minimal revealing cost. The process consists of a quiz, 2 practice rounds (unrewarded), and 32 scored test games. We ported the game to an LLM-compatible representation by (1) transforming the grid into a markdown tabular format, (2) providing callable functions to make decisions, and (3) adjusting instructions to match the textual format.[1].

We also recreated the "default option" nudge, which is a simple, ubiquitous, and effective choice architecture that agents select unless they decline. Here, the basket with the most (unweighted) points

[1]Callaway et al. [8] host a demo of this game, which we encourage readers to try to get a clear sense of the game mechanics: https://default-options.netlify.app

is selected as the default; as such, it pays the most when prizes are equal. This strategy applies both when the nudge is present and when it is not (the basket marked "default" follows this strategy in both cases). Half of the games are control (no nudge), and if the agent declines the nudge, the game continues like a control trial.

We sampled 10 participants from the original experiment to reconstruct the same game parameters. We conducted experiments with cutting-edge LLMs [32] (GPT-3.5-Turbo, GPT-4o-Mini, and GPT 4o; temperature $= 0.2$) with function calling capabilities for revealing, selecting, or accepting/declining a default option (see Appendix A). Beyond testing them out-of-the-box, we attempted to "nudge" model behavior, to explore both the robustness of model decision-making to different choice architectures, and whether this can move it closer to the human behavior distribution. We tested four different conditions: (1) regular game, (2 & 3) simple self-explanation strategies, i.e. asking the model to provide an explanation *before* or *after* making a decision (hereafter, pre-response or post-response rationalization), and (4) leveraging few shot prompts [33–35] with 12 randomly sampled games (6 control, 3 from nudge-accepted and 3 from nudge-declined) from different trials, coming from unseen participants. The explanations in 2 & 3 may not reflect the actual decision-making process of the model [36]; we evaluate them only in terms of their impact on the model's choices. In total, running these experiments used approximately 100 million tokens across models (considering both input and output). A portion of these were for initial tests of the task mechanics.

4 Results

All p-values in the results below are adjusted using the Benjamini-Hochberg correction.

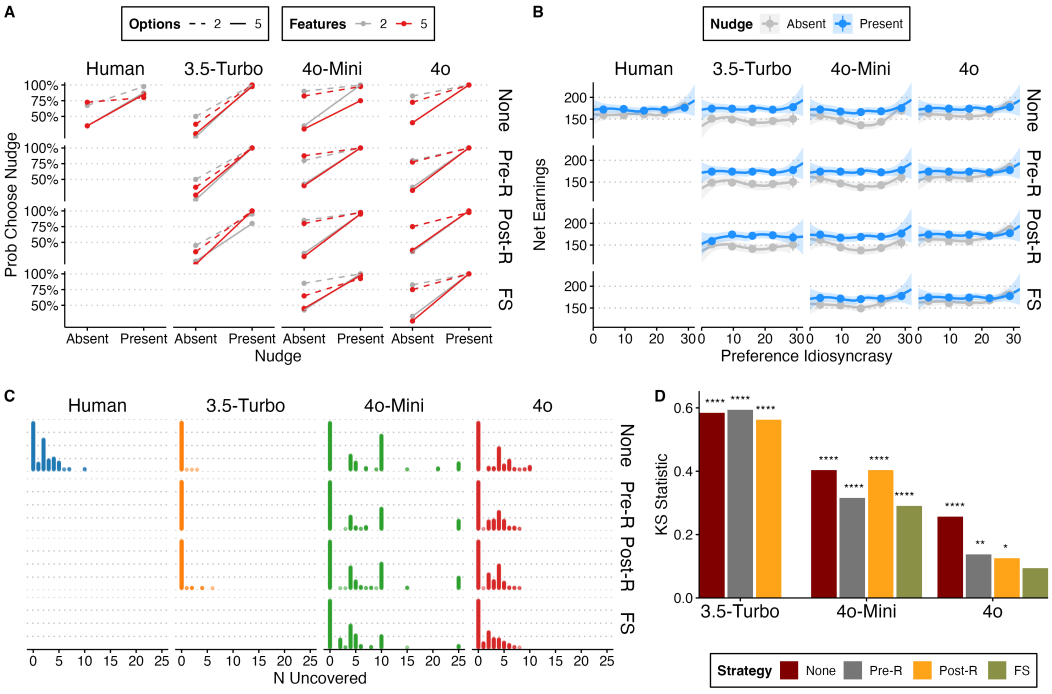

Figure 2: **(A)** Rate of choosing the "default" option in control vs. nudge trials. **(B)** Net earning points as a function of preference idiosyncrasy (L1 distance from the uniform weight vector) [8]. **(C)** Distribution of number of cells uncovered in a control trial before a decision is made. **(D)** Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results comparing distributions in **C** to human participants (lower indicates better alignment). $*$ shows statistically significant difference ($*$ = p<0.05; $**$ = p<0.01; $****$ = p<0.0001). Strategies are "None" (regular game), "Pre-R" and "Post-R" (pre/post-response rationalization), and "FS" (few-shot) where we prompt with records of human game trials (except 3.5-Turbo due to context window limits), taken from unseen participants. **A+B** modeled after Callaway et al. [8].

4.1 Probability of Choosing the Default Option (Figure 2A)

At first glance, Figure 2A suggests alignment between human and model responses. The likelihood of choosing the default option appears similar overall, higher for less complex tasks, and increases with the nudge. However, a closer examination reveals considerable misalignment. We used a mixed-effects logistic regression model to predict the binary outcome of selecting the default option. The model incorporated data source (human vs. each LLM) and trial condition (control vs. nudge) as fixed effects, with random intercepts for choice set complexity factors (number of options and features), prompting method (e.g. explanations and few-shot prompting), and participant heterogeneity.

Without nudges, participants chose the default option with an estimated probability of 0.526 (95% CI [0.246, 0.791]). GPT-3.5-Turbo chose the default significantly less often, i.e. 0.281 (95% CI [0.106, 0.562]; odds ratio=0.352, p<0.0001). GPT-4 models were closer to participant behavior: GPT-4o-Mini at 0.61 (95% CI [0.324, 0.836]), and GPT-4o at 0.574 (95% CI [0.292, 0.815]). Neither GPT-4 model significantly differed from human participants (p>0.13 for both). With the nudge, human participants' probability rose to 0.899 (95% CI [0.714, 0.970]). Still, all models significantly surpassed this. GPT-3.5-Turbo increased to 0.983 (95% CI [0.940, 0.995]; odds ratio=6.550, p<0.0001), GPT-4o-Mini to 0.976 (95% CI [0.920, 0.993]; odds ratio=4.522, p<0.0001), and GPT-4o to 0.998 (95% CI [0.986, 1.000]; odds ratio=49.767, p<0.0001). While GPT-4o variants might approximate participant decision-making in the neutral context, they exhibit much higher sensitivity to the nudge.

4.2 Net Earnings (Figure 2B)

To examine earnings, we used a linear mixed-effects model predicting total (net) points earned, incorporating data source (human vs. each LLM), trial condition, and preference idiosyncrasy (L1 distance from the uniform weight vector) [8] as fixed effects, with the same random intercepts noted before. We used post-hoc marginal effect contrasts, marginalizing over preference idiosyncrasy.

Without the nudge, participants earned an estimated 162.89 points on average (95% CI [144.86, 180.92]). GPT-3.5-Turbo earned much less, at 146.98 points (95% CI [129.41, 164.54]; p<0.0001). GPT-4o-Mini also earned significantly less, with 149.86 points (95% CI [132.36, 167.37]; p<0.0001). GPT-4o's estimated average earnings of 164.63 points (95% CI [147.12, 182.13]) were higher but did not significantly differ from participants' (p=0.73). With the nudge present, participants' earnings increased to 171.81 points (95% CI [153.78, 189.83]). Interestingly, in this condition, none of the models significantly differed. GPT-3.5-Turbo earned 172.70 points (95% CI [155.13, 190.26]; p=0.83), GPT-4o-Mini earned 171.21 points (95% CI [153.70, 188.71]; p=0.61), and GPT-4o earned 173.98 points (95% CI [156.48, 191.49]; p=0.62). In contrast to the default option choices previously discussed, here the models show significantly more alignment with human decision-making *with* the nudge present. From Figure 2B, this seems especially evident as preference idiosyncrasy increases.

4.3 Strategies for Information Acquisition (Figure 2C+D)

To analyze information acquisition strategies, we examined the number of cells uncovered before making a choice. We used two sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS) tests to compare the distributions of each model against human participants across different prompting methods.

Without specialized prompting ("None" condition), all models showed significant differences from human behavior. GPT-3.5-Turbo exhibited the largest deviation (D=0.584, p<0.0001), followed by GPT-4o-Mini (D=0.403, p<0.0001), and GPT-4o (D=0.256, p<0.0001). Pre-response and post-response rationalization ("Pre-R" and "Post-R" conditions) slightly shifted these differences. GPT-3.5-Turbo still differed the most (Pre-R: D=0.594, p<0.0001; Post-R: D=0.562, p<0.0001), followed by GPT-4o-Mini (Pre-R: D=0.316, p<0.0001; Post-R: D=0.403, p<0.0001), and GPT-4o (Pre-R: D=0.138, p=0.006; Post-R: D=0.125, p=0.015). In the few-shot prompting ("FS") condition, GPT-4o-Mini still showed a significant difference from human behavior (D=0.291, p<0.0001), but GPT-4o's distribution was not significantly different (D=0.0938, p=0.12). Figure 2C corroborates these findings: GPT-3.5-Turbo almost always answered immediately without uncovering cells. GPT-4o-Mini often uncovered *many* cells, incurring high costs, and tended to uncover in multiples of 5 suggesting simplistic strategies like uncovering entire rows or columns. GPT-4o's distribution appears most similar to human participants', suggesting that few-shot prompting (with different human data) might be an effective strategy to align decision-making, given a sufficiently strong base model.

5 Conclusion

This study compared LLM and human decision-making in a complex sequential reasoning task, examining effects of default options and strategies for eliciting human-like decision-making. Limitations include a small human sample, limited model and nudge variety, prompt sensitivity, and not testing fine-tuning. Robustly evaluating across such variations is important to understand the generality of these results. We also did not study more open-ended agent scenarios such as computer use which do not yet have standardized tasks associated with them. Additionally, our results don't immediately suggest which mechanisms could be driving model susceptibility to nudges. We hypothesize that sycophancy [37, 38], wherein models diverge from the truth to satisfy users (e.g. even in misleading prompts) as a result of learning from human feedback, might be one such factor. Using human example data proved helpful in shifting model behavior towards observed human responses, but may not always be available. Future research should expand to different settings, nudges, and models (like the recent o1 model) to better understand LLM-based agent behavior in complex decision-making scenarios.

Acknowledgements

The project that gave rise to these results received the support of a fellowship from "la Caixa" Foundation (ID 100010434). The fellowship code is LCF/BQ/EU23/12010079. We thank Keyon Vafa for supportive comments, and all the reviewers for feedback that has improved this manuscript.

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A Tool Calling

In this section, we show the tools available to models in different experimental conditions.

A.1 No explanations

Models don't have to provide explanations before or after making a decision.

```
{
    "type": "function",
    "function": {
        "name": "reveal",
        "strict": True,
        "description": "Call this whenever you choose to reveal the value of a box.",
        "parameters": {
            "type": "object",
```

```
            "properties": {
                "prize": {
                    "type": "string",
                    "enum": prizes,
                    "description": "The prize's letter corresponding to the box.",
                },
                "basket": {
                    "type": "integer",
                    "enum": baskets,
                    "description": "The basket's number corresponding to the box.",
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                    "description": "Accept or decline the default basket.",
                },
            },
            "required": ["decision"],
            "additionalProperties": False,
        },
    }
}
```

A.2 Explain before Deciding

Models have to provide an explanation before revealing, selecting, or accepting/declining a default basket. This is encoded in the order of tool call arguments.

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        "description": "Call this whenever you choose to reveal the value of a box.",
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            "properties": {
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                "prize": {
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                    "enum": prizes,
                    "description": "The prize's letter corresponding to the box.",
                },
                "basket": {
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                    "enum": baskets,
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                },
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        "parameters": {
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                "basket": {
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                    "description": "The basket's number.",
                },
            },
            "required": ["reason", "basket"],
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        },
    }
},
{
```

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    "type": "function",
    "function": {
        "name": "default",
        "strict": True,
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        "parameters": {
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                },
                "decision": {
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                },
            },
            "required": ["reason", "decision"],
            "additionalProperties": False,
        },
    }
}
```

A.3 Explain after Deciding

Models have to provide an explanation after revealing, selecting, or accepting/declining a default basket. This is encoded in the order of tool call arguments.

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{
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                },
                "basket": {
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                    "description": "The basket's number corresponding to the box.",
                },
                "reason": {
                    "type": "string",
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                },
            },
            "required": ["prize", "basket", "reason"],
            "additionalProperties": False,
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    }
},
{
    "type": "function",
```

```
    "function": {
        "name": "select",
        "strict": True,
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        "name": "default",
        "strict": True,
        "description": "Call this to accept or decline the default basket.",
        "parameters": {
            "type": "object",
            "properties": {
                "decision": {
                    "type": "boolean",
                    "description": "Accept or decline the default basket.",
                },
                "reason": {
                    "type": "string",
                    "description": "Explain your reasoning.",
                },
            },
            "required": ["decision", "reason"],
            "additionalProperties": False,
        },
    }
}
```