Why computer games can be essential for human flourishing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to argue that playing computer games for lengthy periods of time, even in a manner that will force the player to forgo certain other activities normally seen as more important, can be an integral part of human flourishing.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors' claim is based on a modern reading of Aristotle's *Nichomacean Ethics*. It should be emphasized that the authors do not argue that computer gaming and other similar online activities are central to all people under all circumstances; but only seek to show that the claim holds true for some people under some circumstances and the authors try to spell out the relevant circumstances in detail.

Findings – The authors provide a list of situations in which playing computer games for lengthy periods of time, in a manner that will force the player to forgo certain other activities normally seen as more important, is an integral part of human flourishing.

Originality/value – The paper puts some novel pressure on the widely-held belief that playing computer games for lengthy periods of time, in a manner that will force the player to forgo certain other activities normally seen as more important. The paper claims that playing some computer games and partaking in some forms of online activities could be highly conducive to what it actually means in practice to take care of oneself and, to paraphrase Aristotle, to be eager for fine actions.

Keywords Computer games, Internet, Gaming, Ethics, Moral philosophy, Virtues, Wellbeing, Happiness, Aristotle

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Traditionally, playing computer games and engaging in other online activities has been seen as a threat to well-being, health and long-term happiness. It is feared that spending many hours per day in front of the screen leads the individual to forsake other, more worthwhile activities, such as human interaction and the up-keeping of good habits with regards to physical exercise, sleeping and eating. Indeed, the computer game industry has been accused of causing everything from anti-social behavior to obesity in the young as well as in adults (De Decker *et al.*, 2012; Sicart, 2009; Spence, 2012).

This article challenges the standard view and seeks to show that some computer games and online activities might in fact be conducive to a good life. The aim is to discuss what role computer games could play when it comes to learning and instilling various capacities and skills that humans need in order for their lives to go well. We argue that if people can improve various aspects of themselves (without jeopardizing

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their overall well-being) through the means of computer games that is a reason to recommend spending more instead of less time in front of the screen. This article couches the claim in a virtue ethical understanding of what constitutes eudaimonia or human flourishing.

Notably, we do not argue that such activities are central to all people under all circumstances. Rather, the main claim of this article is that for some people, under some circumstances, playing computer games for lengthy periods of time, even in a manner that will force the player to forgo certain other activities normally seen as more important, can be an integral part of what it means to lead a good life and, further, that it should be considered a meaningful activity for these individuals.

The structure of this article is as follows. In Section 2 we recapitulate the key components of Aristotle's virtue ethical theory of the good life. Thereafter, in Section 3, we give examples of a new breed of games, which are designed to improve our quality of life in certain situations. These games support, we argue, the claim that playing computer games is a meaningful activity. In Section 4, we state, discuss and rebut four objections to our claim, which is followed by a concluding discussion in Section 5.

2. Aristotle on human flourishing

Prior to assessing whether computer gaming belongs to the type of activities which could be taken to undermine our well-being, health and long-term happiness, it might be helpful to recapitulate Aristotle's account of a good human life. Broadly speaking, the concern seems to be that spending many hours per day in front of the screen crowds out or undermines other, implicitly more worthwhile, activities. Common examples include interaction with families and friends, sleeping, and maintaining healthy eating habits. Let us take a closer look at why these other activities could be considered (more) important.

Aristotle claims that the supreme human good is eudaimonia. This is the happy and fulfilled life for every human being. Regardless whatever else one might want out of life, whatever one's preferences happen to be, the eudaimon life is the best life for humans. By definition, the eudaimon life consists of all intrinsically worthwhile activities and it is when we lead this life we function well and can flourish as human beings.

In order to lead the eudaimon life we need to act in accordance with a number of moral and intellectual virtues. Notably, however, such a virtuous life is not just a set of actions. Rather, it is a set of actions performed by someone who does them because she correctly sees the point in doing them. On the Aristotelian account the virtues have both cognitive and emotional dimensions and the way to instil them is a combination of education, habituation and lifelong practice. While Aristotle insisted that we all have a capacity for virtue and vice (and thus that we have personal moral responsibility) he also recognized that the virtues come in stages and that the process is likely to be both lengthy and to require commitment and effort. One concrete way of learning the virtues is to model oneself on the example of the good man. The idea is that we can recognise virtue in others without mastering the virtues ourselves (just like we can see when someone is in fine health without being a professor of medicine) and seek to emulate their behaviour.

For Aristotle the value of an act depends on whether what the agent is doing can be an integral part of the eudaimon life. This is not to say, however, that the consequences of the act are irrelevant and should be disregarded. Consequences do matter to the virtuous agent but they are not the right-making feature against which acts are

to be evaluated. In the case of the good life one has to think specifically about the quality of what one is doing and only secondarily of the causal effectiveness. In most cases the virtuous act will indeed generate the best outcome but the fact that this is not always the case hardly poses a threat to the validity of the theory as such.

Notably, the good life is also about the relationship one has with other people and many elements of the good life can only be enjoyed by interacting with other humans. Aristotle held that no one can be happy without friends and that we all need to have close and meaningful relationships with others (NE 1169b10-15). He argued that a friend is "another self" and that we ought to care as much about the happiness of our friend as we do about our own. A key feature of a good friendship is the balanced willingness of the friends to do things for one another. But what you do for your friend is not done to secure advantages for yourself, it is done simply because you see your friend as another self.

There is, however, a very strong emphasis on the need for self-love in Aristotle and he is indeed frequently accused of recommending and defending blatantly egotistical behaviour. It is of course, true that Aristotelian ethics preach egoism but, arguably, it would be hasty to dismiss the ideas as ethical egoism. If pressed, the virtuous agent will say that the overarching rationale behind everything she does is her own eudaimonia. She does the fine and noble, willingly and with pleasure because that is happiness and the best life she could ever have as a human being. Now, of course, that is egoism in one sense of the word but it seems worthwhile to recall that the virtuous agent does not see the virtues as mere instruments. She is not a calculating and scheming agent who contemplates how to maximize at every turn. Because eudaimonia is such a rich and complex matter involving many aspects of life the agent has to be sensitive to the particular circumstances, read the situation right and then decide what to do. It might indeed be correct to act for one's own sake but there is also (arguably) room for self-sacrifice and profound consideration for the good of others. It is important to note that being concerned about one's own fulfilment is not a bad thing *per se* on this account, in fact it is the only rational thing, but one can be selfish in different ways (NE 1169b10-15). There is the bad, vicious way, where the agent displays graspiness and greed and then there is the good, virtuous way, where the agent is entitled to secure the greater share if the noble for herself.

As just explained, humans have a very strong moral obligation to look after themselves (both body and mind) and to instil the intellectual and moral virtues. Virtue ethicists hold that this can be done though training and education and by following the good examples set by others. It is not inconceivable that some such training and education could take the form of computer games. Indeed, as will be elaborated on in the next section, it has been shown that learning and practicing new skills in an on-line environment is highly conducive to learning. Hence, were it to be the case that we could acquire some such skills in a better and more efficient way – but still as long-lasting as alternative methods – through playing certain computer games it would appear that both the young and the old would have good reason to make such games an integral part of their lives. Notably, the potential of virtue ethics as a helpful analytical approach to some of the ethical issues that pertain to computer games (as compared to, e.g. rights or duties based theories) has recently begun to be investigated in a critical fashion (Fossheim, 2012).

The next section explores some concrete examples of skills and capacities that we might to be able to develop through the means of computer games. Some games consume considerable effort and time and would then have to be prioritized at the

expense of other perhaps more traditionally valuable pursuits. However, before we discuss the moral relevance of this, it merits emphasising that we do not wish to imply that the actual process of habituation cannot be substituted simply in virtue of the alternative method being "efficient" consider the case of an enhancement drug that, for example, reduced unwarranted aggression or improved capacity for risk assessment. While the effect might be welcome and positive both for the individual and the wider society it is hard to see how that could rival the rich and many facetted experience that comes with the habituation process as described by Aristotle. Further, on the virtue ethics account the actual process has intrinsic value. What matters are not only the capacities the person manages to develop eventually, but also the experience of acquiring and exercising the virtues. Because doing the virtuous thing is leading the good life the learning process is valuable in itself and is part of the good life.

3. A new breed of games

In this section we discuss three distinct domains of life in which computer games can help us to improve our abilities and knowledge in ways that are important for how well our lives go. As can be seen below, the examples we propose involve both cognitive as well as physical skills.

The three areas we have in mind are the following:

(1) issues relating to physical and mental health;

(2) issues relating to professional, intellectual and other "life skills"; and

(3) issues relating to cognitive capacities and decision-making.

Arguably, the threshold for many people to interact and engage online is both low and decreasing (European Commission, 2012). In part this has to do with the high level of so-called "gamification" in many Western societies. Somewhat roughly put, gamification is the practice of including computer game technology in mundane everyday tasks so that they become more alluring and fun. We do not need to look far for examples. As pointed out by McGonigal (2011), gamification is all around us already today. Consider, for example, the so-called runner aps, the purpose of which are to make running and jogging more appealing (http://runkeeper.com/). Or consider the app "Chore Wars", the purpose of which is to carry out household chores in a game like environment where you compete against the other members of your household (www.chorewars.com/). What these apps do is to visualize our efforts, showing us (as well as others around us) how we have performed. This element of competition and instant, and rather concrete, feedback is of course, very appealing to many people. Some might even say it has addictive qualities.

Against this backdrop of a high general level of "computer literacy" and the fact that (some) computer games have proven pedagogical benefits we suggest to take the argument one step further. We propose that playing computer games (and interacting online) can qualify as meaningful and worthwhile activities and, consequently, that there might be good reasons to revise the traditionally rather negative view of computer games and other such online activities.

3.1 Computer games as facilitators of a healthy life-style

It is becoming increasingly common for doctors to give their patients written prescriptions (as opposed to general recommendations) for increased physical activity. Studies have shown that when a doctor gives the patient a detailed weekly exercise

scheme it tends to have some very positive effects. The patients are not only highly likely to follow it and are often able to cut back on their medication but they also tend to report increased well-being and quality of life (for an overview, The British Department of Health, 2004). Very generally the idea is that the patient takes full responsibility for their own regime and there are no regular follow-ups with the healthcare professional. In some cases there is remote reporting via a web site but it only very rarely takes the form of monitoring.

Doctors also prescribe lifestyle adjustments related to diet, alcohol consumption and smoking. Unfortunately, however, it seems that such prescriptions are less efficient than those for physical exercise. At this stage it is not clear that the majority of patients are willing or able to change their erring habits (with regards to consumption broadly conceived of) permanently and as a result the positive long-term impact must be subject to further analysis (The British Department of Health, 2004).

There is also an on-going, scholarly debate on the connection between emotions, emotional responses and computer games. Lankoski (2012) investigates how a number of structural features of the computer games are related to, and impact, the emotional responses of the player(s). His main point is that certain goals and other structural features of the game influence the player's emotional reactions. Translating such research to the clinical setting, consider the successful Swedish example of on-line mental healthcare cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) via a personal web site that the patient logs on to regularly.

Let us now clarify how we think that the experiences of such practices might be relevant to the claim advanced in this article. On the one hand, the results of the physical exercise prescriptions suggest that most individuals do not necessarily require human-to-human interaction (such as a trainer, coach or doctor) in order to alternate their lifestyle (long-term) in a manner that is conducive to well-being. Once they receive the original instruction (prescription) and the benefits are explained to them by a figure of authority – in this case their medical doctor – they tend to comply even when it requires certain effort and the benefits might not be immediately noticeable. On the other hand, it appears that altering one's lifestyle with regards to consumption is a different kettle of fish and that many people need support in this. In order to increase the motivation and compliance we can imagine various web-based tools such as computer games, online reporting, chat rooms, discussion forums, distance consulting with experts and downloadable apps (naturally these are not restricted to the computer interface). Plausibly such tools could increase the commitment, instill new and better habits and further the individual's understanding and knowledge.

Consequently, there is already evidence of how people's lives can be significantly improved on in a well-established, efficient and lasting way through the media of computer game like environments. For instance, Fernández-Aranda *et al.* (2012) and Duric *et al.* (2012) report ongoing research into games that enable people to better manage stress, anger and phobia. For a concrete example, consider the game "PlayMancer" discussed by Fernández-Aranda *et al.* They describe it as follows:

> PlayMancer is an EU initiative to develop a video game prototype for treating specific mental disorders (namely EDs and impulse control disorders). It is being applied at the Department of Psychiatry (University Hospital of Bellvitge, Barcelona, Spain) in mental disorders (mainly EDs and behavioural addictions) and introduces the player to an interactive scenario (named Islands), where the final goal is to increase emotional self-control skills in patients

and self-control over their general impulsive behaviours. A multidisciplinary team of clinicians, engineers and programmers have developed this video game, by considering user requirements and emotional reactions as well as personality profiles of the targeted patients (Fernández-Aranda *et al.*, 2012, pp. 365-366).

3.2 Computer games as a way to improve professional skills and general knowledge

Already today, specialized computer games are used widely in the training of healthcare professionals. For a good example consider medical instruments that rely on haptic feedback. Haptic feedback can be described as an artificial resistance that mimics sensory impressions. In concrete terms this means that these games enable doctors to practice surgery without involving a real patient. In the computerized environment they get the sensory experience of touching human skin, muscle and other tissue. It also enables specialists active in an area with few patients to upkeep, and further improve, their skills and to practice new methods without risks (systems of this type are being developed by numerous companies. One example is Novint Technologies Inc in Washington, PA, USA).

Similarly, using 3D touch games and 3D add-ons could prove useful for increasing general knowledge. The idea is that educational games can be used to improve life skills (as broadly conceived of) something which can enable people to fare better in life. Interestingly, some independent game designers/developers show increasing focus on aspects such as the human being and human interaction in a broader and sometimes rather everyday sense. While this is not our main point it is related to the idea defended here, i.e. that there is a new(ish) breed of computer games which do not fit the "action entertainment" stereotype. And, further, that such games and the roles they can play in the pursuit of the good-life and their effects on well-being in the wider sense ought to be studied and taken seriously. In light of such and other positive experiences of physical well-being and general knowledge the next step might well be moral betterment of the self via on-line games.

3.3 Computer games as a way to improve (moral) decision-making and cognitive capacities

Some computer games and other online activities help us to improve our cognitive capacities and make us better at making decisions. Here, we are thinking about gamified decision support systems and games that help to improve memory, or games that un-veil our bias and helps to make us more objective, games that improves our capacity for risk assessment and epistemic deference.

There is a well-documented body of scientific studies looking at how people who incorporate certain life style habits, such as meditation and memory games, can affect and improve their, e.g. working memory and overall cognitive flexibility; van Leeuwen *et al.* (2012) and Hölzel *et al.* (2008). In a similar vein, Klingberg (2009) researches the impact of physical exercise on improved memory (both process memory and long-term memory) and has found evidence for such connections. Cardiovascular training has also been seen to boost capacity for problem solving both in children and adults, as pointed out by Eppig *et al.* (2010). Plausibly, computer games can come to play an important role in such undertakings and perhaps facilitate the forming of such habits. We are here thinking of the type of computer games that activate the player, e.g. Wii games as opposed to sedentary games.

Regardless of one's position on the role of technology in society it can hardly be denied that human well-being and quality of life would improve radically were people

in general to become better at making decisions – to behave (more) responsibly and consider the interests of others as well as the long-term consequences of their actions. Given the pressing nature and potentially catastrophic consequences of issues such as global health, global warming and armed conflict around the world it might be wise to further explore how technology can help us to become more virtuous agents.

4. Four objections

In this section we discuss what we believe to be some of the most forceful arguments against the claim that computer gaming is sometimes an essential component of the good life.

The first objection is that computer gaming is addictive (Sim *et al.*, 2012). Let us for the sake of the argument assume that this empirical claim is true: some players do in fact get addicted, in roughly the same way as some people who consume tobacco or other drugs do. Even assuming this, our claim about computer gaming still holds true. To start with, note that being reliant on things that (unlike tobacco and other drugs) often make us fare better in life would be a bad thing *per se*. If anything, getting hooked would increase motivation and make the individual more likely to continue with the good type of game-playing and, thus, continue to experience the beneficial effects such as improved physical and mental health, increased mobility and prolonged life-span. From that point of view, the addictive quality would be rather helpful.

That said, and as pointed out by Fossheim (2012, p. 95), the relationship between computer games and how they impact concepts like "agency" and "identity" is of great interest. An example of a key issue meriting reflection and further research, is what it can mean to be a morally responsible agent when acting in (and out of) a game context.

It is also worth keeping in mind that individuals are already today free to form habits and carry out activities that we know to be both addictive and harmful. Examples include smoking, drinking alcohol, and some extreme sports. One of the hallmarks of the democratic society is the long-standing tradition of the liberal ideal that people ought be free to pursuit their life as they wish, as long as others are not harmed. For concreteness, consider the case of love, which is an illustrative but perhaps somewhat contentious example: many people learn very early in life that activities such as romantic love are high-risk projects. To reap the rewards one has to invest considerably and the risk of emotional suffering is very high. Yet no modern, democratic society would dream of micro-managing people's choice of love partners. If anything, love is idealized for these very qualities – the fact that true love is so elusive, unpredictable and hard to pin down makes the pursuit of it all the more desirable.

We now come to the second objection. Its key claim is that computer gaming is something that is done at the expense of, and therefore crowds out, other more worthwhile pursuits in life. Instead of sitting in front of your computer you could have been talking to your friends, spent time with family or engaged in physical exercise. Against the fact that a lot of people might play computer games with their near and dear it is protested that there, none the less, are more worthwhile ways in which such interaction can take place. In response to this, we would like to stress that we are not suggesting that computer games should be played in an un-restricted fashion any more than any other good habit should be overdone. The doctrine of the mean is a central feature of virtue ethics: all good things can become bad if they are exaggerated, but that does not make moderate consumption a bad thing. Drinking too much milk is bad even for children but drinking

the right amount gives important vitamins and calcium; exaggerated exposure to sun causes melanoma, but too little sun leads to a lack of vitamin D and so on and so forth.

It should also be noted that the operative word in our defense of computer gaming here is not instead of but also. Playing computer games and having "real" experiences are not mutually exclusive. It is not as replacement of, let us say, playing outdoors with friends, walking in the forest, interacting with other human beings face-to-face. If anything, if could enable us to do more of that or to do it more vigorously and get more pleasure out of it as we plausibly would be in better shape, mentally and physically.

The third objection is that many computer games are very violent, which may occasionally stimulate people to do things in the real world that they ought not to do (Gunter and Daly, 2012 for critical discussion of this claim). In response to this objection we concede that some computer games are of course, very violent, although it is still unclear whether the causal claim this objection is based on is false. The exact nature of connections between violent games and actual behavior need further research, but it does not seem implausible that some games can play a role in shaping the behavior of the player(s). Indeed, Sicart (2012, pp. 102, 104-106, 110) suggests that game design could be fruitfully analyzed from an ethics perspective. We agree that such research is both of practical and theoretical relevance and would welcome such undertakings. On the other hand, there are, of course, a great many games that contain no violence at all. So even if true, the scope of this third objection, i.e. that some computer games are violent and that playing them can affect the player in a negative way, is very narrow and fails to capture the gist of the argument made here. Whether such violent games should be tolerated or not is a separate issue which we will make no attempt to address in the present article.

The fourth and final objection holds that computer gaming has negative effects on our perception of the "real world" and our role in it. If you play too much, you may sometimes find it hard to distinguish between virtual events in the virtual world and real events in the real world. Let us for the sake of the argument suppose that the empirical component of this objection is true: it is indeed correct that for some players, playing "too much" makes it difficult to distinguish between real world events and virtual events.

As pointed out by Spence (2012) some players might come to form a very close relationship with their avatars, to an extent that may impact their idea of identity. Interestingly, Spence is seeking to shed light on:

> [. . .] not what the identity relationship of players to their avatars is but rather the ethical rights and obligations to which the purposive actions of players in virtual worlds through their avatars give rise (Spence, 2012, p. 127).

Very briefly, he concludes that if and when the rules of the virtual world(s) inside the game come into conflict with "the requirements of universal morality as established on the basis of the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC)" (Spence, 2012, p. 125) the latter always takes precedent. While it falls outside the scope of this paper the relationship between the players and these other worlds requires much further research. For a tragic and dramatic example of the consequences when the game world is conflated with the real world, consider the case where a British woman filed for divorce after finding out that her husband was courting an avatar in a game (second life) he was playing regularly (*The Guardian*, 13 November 2008).

But what is the moral significance of this putative fact? As far as we can see, it is not a problem *per se* if people partly live in their dreams, as long as they still function reasonably well in society. If you read too many love novels, for example, you might come to care deeply for the characters in the novel and develop an exaggerated attachment to them. To worry and feel for virtual characters in a novel is, however, not a problem as long as you are still able to function well in society. We of course, concede that there might be extreme cases in which players get completely absorbed by a computer game and fail to fulfill theory duties towards others, just like one can get absorbed by a novel to an unhealthy degree. This is, however, not a valid reason for all of us to stop reading novels; hence, it is not a valid reason for stop playing computer games.

To know where to draw the line however can prove challenging. It is far from clear that there is a sharp line that the gamer can risk to cross after which s/he becomes too engaged and the lines between the real world and the game world blurred beyond distinction. In a recent paper, Briggle (2012) offers an interesting discussion on how, and to what extent, playing computer games impacts agency, worldviews, moral behaviour, level of interaction, forming personal relationships. Briefly, put, Briggle seeks to forward the ethical evaluation of computer games through a type of analysis which also sheds light on people's moral intuitions (both with regards to the pros and cons of gaming) on the subject. After pointing out that over attachment to one single ethical theory (regardless of which that may be) is unproductive and says that a better way to approach the issues is to "follow a thread which runs throughout many theories and use this as the *locus* for ethical analysis and interpretation" (Briggle, 2012, p. 162). He puts forward the following candidate; character (and relates this to values and valuations of the person), and then proceeds to discuss four ways in which computer games and character relate to eachother. Briggle (2012, p. 162) calls this "the character approach to computer game ethics".

Briggle concludes that from a positive aspect games can have an instrumental value as the players can learn, e.g. interpersonal skills and become more creative. In our opinion, this is a very reasonable stance to take towards computer gaming.

5. The future

Our society is becoming increasingly "gamified". Over the last decades the border between animation and authentic actor performances has become blurred in the movies. So much so that consumers today expects and demands this mix in most films to find them entertaining and exciting. A more recent example of how the traditional features of "the on-line world" are becoming integrated in our everyday lives can be found in the field of product marketing and product placement. Here, the trend is for marketing efforts to become more interactive and to seek to stimulate all our senses by sending out, for example, tailored smells, noise, voices and phone messages as the potential consumer passes by. Consider for example the recent duet by rapper Jay Z and Tupac Shakur. The show involved a highly authentic hologram of Shakur (shot dead in LA in 1996) co-performing with Jay Z. An even more extreme version of this is the Japanese animated pop star Hatsune Miku. "She" is a 3D singing hologram who gives concerts and has a fan club of dedicated followers. Anyone with access to the internet can easily access these video clips.

These trends, in combination with widespread computer literacy in our society, speak in favor of a low threshold and a high acceptance rate for many of the types of online activities explored here. Reassuringly then, if some computer games and other

online activities could be shown to be an efficient way to enable people to improve their intellectual and moral virtues and thus have a positive impact on their well-being and quality of life, then the compliance rate might be comparatively low.

This article claims that playing some computer games and partaking in some forms of online activities could be highly conducive to what it actually means in practice to take care of oneself and, to paraphrase Aristotle, to be eager for fine actions. An even stronger conclusion, which would require more empirical research, would be that if the type of computer based activities described here turned out to be a better, or more "efficient" way to instill the intellectual and moral virtues, then all agents seeking to lead the good life would be wise to opt to spend time in front of the screen. Even when doing so would crowd out alternative activities and pursuits. The mind boggles at the thought that parents in a not too distant future might encourage their children to stop playing, come inside and buckle down in front of their computers!

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