

Structures and Goals: Philosophy and Games

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Introduction

Games are everywhere. They continuously permeate our lives in a myriad of forms. We play games, spectate games, comment on games, talk about games; our lives will be shown to be led through games. Despite our permeation in games, the question of what games can mean to individuals has largely gone unexamined. This research is an attempt to explore what games can mean to individuals in their lives, as people live their lives. The primary focus of understanding the role of games in human life has been centered on Game Theory, and how games interact with the choice of the player, or actor, involved. The intention of this paper is to offer an alternate more humanistic examination of games and their relation to how people can develop meaning in life. To do so, first several basic characteristics seen in games will be identified and analyzed. Ultimately, to uncover how games might relate to a theoretical goal of human life that games hold, Aristotle's conception of happiness as the goal of human life will be explored in relation to games. Finally a return to games will be made in order to see how games might aid in achieving the goal Aristotle sees for human life.

Methods

This research will attempt to trace ideas and concepts regarding games back to prior authors to attempt to gain insight into what purpose games might have in and for human life. The texts used, in order of their appearance in the article, are Mark Wolf's *Medium of the Video Game*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Drew Hyland's *The Question of Play*. While each of these texts offer insights into games, Aristotle's

conception of happiness, *Eudaimonia*, is particularly important in seeing how games might develop meaning throughout an individual's life. Wolf's *Medium of the Video Game* highlights basic characteristics that can be used to identify games. The basic goal of human life, and what that goal means is identified by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Finally Drew Hyland's *The Question of Play*, highlights the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world and how that concept might affect how an individual approaches the world around them.

Games

When initially considering what a game is, examples are easy to come by. Board games, and sports, for instance, are easily identifiable games. Furthermore, these games bring with them motivation for play. People look to games for entertainment, relaxation, business, social interaction, fun, mental or physical engagement and more. Yet not all games are so easy to identify or to have their importance circumscribed. Consider folding laundry: It is normally deemed a chore, a task which people need to do throughout their lives. Yet the act of folding laundry contains within it a process and pattern that one must develop. People do not start out experts in the folding of laundry. It takes years for them to perfect the craft, and, as with any task that can be mastered, there comes a certain pride at having attained that mastery. What one can see in the process of folding laundry is the mastery and development of a certain skillset. Naturally, in learning and perfecting a set of skills, a certain amount of happiness in the form of pride and accomplishment arises. Yet, another

example of such an experience can be seen in language. Aside from fitting nicely with the definition of games that will be posited shortly, one can see more traditional aspects of a game in language. There are resources which must be applied to achieve a certain outcome. Symbols and sounds must be used properly and organized in such a way that communication is possible. These examples are disparate though. They are of tasks that seem unrelated to games, yet when identified in a different light, clearly seem to be games.

It would seem from these two prior examples that, if nothing else, the common notion of games is unclear, because there are underlying assumptions regarding what constitutes a game. An alternate way of distinguishing games is identified by Mark J.P. Wolf in his book *The Medium of the Video Game*. While primarily a work examining how video games as a medium of entertainment developed, Wolf opens the book with an examination of the terms video and games. About games, he writes that there are essentially four key elements that can be used to identify them: Conflict, rules, player ability, and a valued outcome (14). These are basic structures of games. Games can be seen to use, or emphasize different structures. For the purposes of this paper, which examine games in general, each of these aspects will be considered in their own light in the following paragraph.

Conflict is central to a game. It engages players with the content of the game and motivates them to continue playing. Without an opposing team, a game of baseball is nonsensical. Conflict is clearly important to what a game is, yet it is rules which are most often cited in defining a game. Rules perform a few different tasks in games. The first is an agreement between the player and the game. In order to resolve a conflict, the player is bound to abide by the rules, which will allow for the conflict to

be resolved. Rules are the framework and foundation by which a game functions. In a game of Connect Four, the rules do not allow players to play four pieces on their turn, they only allow the playing of a single piece. Thus through these rules the game is given a structure and a kind of orientation. Strategies and actions the players are allowed to perform have limits and must be directed in a different way, in order to resolve the conflict, than they would otherwise. The fourth structure of a game is the valued outcome. Where conflict seems to bring players into a game, it would mean nothing without a valued outcome that player's strive for. Similarly, rules are abided because the outcome of the game is important and desired; it has meaning for the player. Where the baseball game would be nonsensical without the conflict of the other team, and the game of Connect Four would be totally different without the specific way that rules orient it, neither game is played at all without a valued outcome. Lastly the element games that Wolf identifies as player skill may be more clearly interpreted in light of those who play games. To have skilled players for a game, players are first required. Games then require players. What one might mean by skill is up for debate. For instance, someone in a sport might be considered very skilled at his or her sport. However, if that individual is found to have made unfair advantages for themselves by breaking the rules of that sport, their skill is called into question. As a mean road, player skill will be considered the accomplishment of an individual in operating within a game's parameters. A skilled player of a game is skilled through their mastery of the systems of the game. Just as a skilled artisan understands the tricks of their trade, a skilled player has cultivated their knowledge of the game in question.

This basic architecture of a game is easily extrapolated outside of the normal

bounds of a game. Fields of study can also be seen to fall within this very pattern. Archeology and history both have a unique set of protocols that their respective fields of study operate by; each sees its position in the world as resolving some conflict and striving towards some valued outcome. In this way even larger structures have these basic characteristics. Language for example can be seen as a game. The English language has rules that are abided by, which orient language in a certain way. When someone uses language they want to achieve clear communication. This framework, made from the above characteristics, is extremely pervasive throughout our lives, as has been stated multiple times. To explore a possible answer as to why this structure permeates human life, Aristotle's concept of *Eudaimonia* will be examined.

***Eudaimonia* and Happiness**

The question that Aristotle seeks to examine in his *Nicomachean Ethics* is largely how and why an individual would lead an ethical life, and what an ethical life might be. That is to say: What does human life appear to strive towards? To open onto such a broad topic, Aristotle begins the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* by attempting to ascertain what types of goals or ends human life strives for. He begins by drawing a distinction between ends, goods, and production, "Wherever there are ends apart from the actions, the products are by nature better than the activities." (Aristotle, 1). Put another way, we want what we strive for enough to carry out the activity it takes to get it, and so it follows that people must prefer to have the ends of their actions rather than the actions themselves. It also follows that the ultimate good, or goal of action, would also be what other goals are sought out to help accomplish. For instance a baker might have a goal to go to a store and buy some flour. This goal obviously can also be seen as a means to his ultimate

end of baking. To help find out what that ultimate end might be, or what the ethical life might strive towards, Aristotle reasons that "the ends of the ruling sciences are more choice worthy than all the ends subordinate to them." (Ibid). If one frames the search for the goal of human life in terms of a product or good, it also follows that to find this good the 'ruling', or highest, sciences must have their goals made clear. It is not enough to identify individual activities in relation to the goals they seek, but rather to look at an order of activities, a science, in relation to other orders of activities, other sciences.

The ultimate science, the ultimate system or order of activity, for humans would likely have our highest product in mind (Ibid). To remain focused on the topic of this paper though, the question might be shifted to: If the greatest good that people strive towards is seen as the ultimate goal of our actions and other ends, what might that be? Aristotle identifies that ultimate good as already bring identified by most people: It is happiness (Aristotle, 3). For Aristotle's analysis, happiness is an end which is not sought out for an 'in order to' of any other end. To better understand this line of thinking which lead Aristotle to this conclusion it is helpful to think back to the example of the baker. We left off with the baker seeking to bake as his ultimate goal, which begs the question: Why does the baker want to bake? In baking the baker will produce the good of his or her trade, demonstrating a certain mastery of skills. In one case, the baker bakes because it gives him a sense of fulfillment, or perhaps happiness. In another case, if the baker bakes for a job, then the baker wants to make money which will allow for a roof over head, food to eat, or other goods. Why are these things sought out? To avoid hunger, and cold. Why is this desirable? So that the individual will be happy. In most

cases, the cold and hunger bring about discomfort, suffering, and, ultimately, unhappiness. This behavior can be seen in different behaviors as well. If a poet becomes poor, and as a result hungry and cold, in the pursuit of their craft, then it stands to reason that what makes that poet happy, is not comforts of food or warmth, but rather the pursuit of poetry as a means to an end, which ultimately contributes to happiness.

Digging deeper into Aristotle's thought, the sense of happiness that Aristotle describes is not quite the same as an ordinary conception of the word. What is significant about Aristotle's happiness is that he develops it to move beyond the idea of happiness as gratification, pride, or more generally, satisfying some want. This is regardless of whether or not that want it to serve in public office, or to own the newest thing. Aristotle writes that, "happiness is a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with complete virtue" (Ibid, 16). This conception of happiness, *Eudaimonia*, has three distinct and important parts: It is an activity of some sort, it is of the soul, and finally it is "in accord with complete virtue". Thus, happiness seems to be an activity regarding the soul, but is nothing if not done by and through complete virtue.

For Aristotle, the virtues are required to be developed in the leading of an ethical life. A person must be virtuous to lead the ethical life, which is also to say that happiness is found through the virtues. Aristotle writes that to aspire to be a virtuous person in a particular character trait an individual must make a habit of doing the virtuous act (Aristotle 19-20). Habit and practice are key to the development of a virtue such as bravery. If our baker is to be a brave baker, then he must practice bravery through brave acts. The more the baker is brave, the more bravery becomes part of his character, and, by extension, the more likely

the baker is to be brave in his actions. Virtuous behavior is not something which can necessarily be pointed to, or rather, it is not something which is easy to attain. Virtue must be developed if it is to allow an individual to act in such a way as to produce happiness. Thus, ultimately, happiness is sought out by the virtues, but through and because of an attitude that individual must adopt: An attitude, or stance, which seeks to develop and nurture is what is finally the means to attaining the end of happiness.

Games as Bastions of Meaning

In order to examine how the basic structure of games, identified earlier, might interact with Aristotle's concept of *Eudaimonia*, its now necessary to examine ways in which people interact with games. For this section two general interactions of games will be identified and discussed: Games as escapism, and games as a bastion of meaning.

The first way that some can approach games is through escapism. Approaching games in this way is easy to conceive. Playing games as a means of escaping from the current situation an individual is in. There are two questions to explore from this type of approach to games. The first is what an individual might acquire from approaching games in this manner? It would seem, at a cursory level that the person in question is relaxing in some way, depending on what kind of game is being played. This leads to the second question: Why do games have this effect on an individual? It is easy to see games as an empty experience, or one which distracts from more important pursuits in life. A game of solitaire played alone can leave an individual feeling as though he or she wasted their time idly. Again, there certainly seem to be some truth in these ideas, but it is the assertion of this paper that perhaps there is something under the surface

of individuals playing games which is worthy of more investigation.

In order to answer this second question then, it is important to return to the original analysis of games and keep in mind what was put forth there: The structure of games, consisting of rules, conflict, player ability, and a valued outcome, is pervasive far-reaching in human life. What is universal about examining games in this light is that games are a means of more explicitly dwelling in this structure. That is to say, it is through games that this basic structure appears most clearly, and, having appeared more clearly, can be seen to permeate human life. Games are an activity which explicitly operates through and by this structure. The answer to the second question above then, may be that games allow one to take refuge in the basic structure, like someone seeking shelter in a storm. No longer is a game of solitaire on the computer about winning that game of solitaire, or simply escaping into the game. The game of solitaire has the potential to have this underlying structure seized upon by an individual, and further, to have that structure developed.

As a means of clarifying this type of language and what is being stated about games, Drew Hyland's work *The Question of Play* offers an interesting insight which will allow a clearer perspective on games. For Hyland, play is not just an activity, but rather, "It is a mode of comportment toward things, a mode of being-in-the-world" (Hyland 45). Play is an attitude, or a stance which is distinctive and alters the way in which one views his or her surroundings (Ibid). The phrase being-in-the-world is a philosophical term that describes the way that one is in regards to the world. The baker has a particular being-in-the-world, which directs and shifts the way in which he or she relates to other people, the landscape around them, or the objects at hand. The

baker takes on a certain direction towards his or her ends, or goals, and is thus directed in everything that he or she does. In taking up an end or goal, this orientation in the world can shift and change with respect to these new goals. While Hyland focuses on play specifically as a comportment, this idea can be applied to a way in which one might take up the games around them.

When one plays then, they take up an attitude, or directedness, in regard to their world, which orients them to view the world in relation to the goal of play. This same kind of insight can also be seen in a particular way of taking up games, of directing oneself towards games in sense. For Aristotle, it was the cultivation of the virtues which allowed one to achieve a state of happiness in their lives. It is the cultivation of the virtues which is critical to attaining happiness, because through practice of the virtues one can attain the right habits which further strengthen an individual's cultivation of virtue. A directedness towards games then is important, because it aims at the cultivation of the structural meaning inherent in games.

Conclusion

In examining games, and how they contribute to the meaning individuals form in life, we have examined not only games, but how and why individuals seek meaning in their lives. It has been shown that games can be seen in light of basic characteristics, namely rules, player ability, conflict, and a valued outcome. These characteristics form the structure of a game which holds meaning for individuals. We see in Aristotle that the one goal people have in life is the attainment of happiness, through a development of the virtues. Further, two examples of how individuals can relate to games as bastions of meaning have been shown: A relation through escapism into a tight controlled structure of meaning, or, within this structure of meaning, the structure is taken

up and developed. Development and cultivation of this kind, where they constitute a stance that one takes up in his or her particular being in the world, can allow an individual to adopt a stance similar to the one identified by Aristotle in regards to the cultivation of the virtues. Ultimately it is this orientation which seeks to cultivate and develop a structure which allowed for the attainment of Aristotle's *Eudaimonia*. It is the valued outcome which is so important in the development of the virtues, because that valued outcome is what Aristotle identifies as the ultimate good that people strive for:

Happiness. People care about games and play games for a valued outcome, but they do so through a set of rules, to resolve a set conflict, and with a particular level of skill. This interpretation of games contributing to the meaning of life, the ultimate goal of life, is, in the end, one which sees the goal of human life as the attainment of happiness through a stance of development and cultivation. This stance can be accomplished in the structure of games, and, because the structure of games is pervasive in our lives, this stance of cultivation and development applies to the experience of life as whole.

Works Cited

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